

# **Heroes and Heels: Investigating the Star Enactments of Charlton Heston**

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# **Heroes and Heels: Investigating the Star Enactments of Charlton Heston**

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## **Abstract**

This investigation undertakes to re-centre the figure of the film star and their film appearances in the field of star study. To this end it uses Charlton Heston as its focus in a re-appraisal of existing methods of accounting for the star phenomenon in cinema. It also concomitantly re-assesses existing accounts of the significance of Charlton Heston as a film star. This thesis posits a robust method for identifying the specificities of the star's contribution to a film's meanings and effects across the body of their work by drawing on Andrew Britton's understanding of the 'star enactment'. Present approaches through which to engage with the details of a star's performance are considered in detail and the weaknesses of those that seek to impose external schemas onto such discussions are highlighted. The difficulties with approaches that attempt to account for the star as a signifying phenomenon through the concepts of acting and performance are also considered. Existing methods which may allow for a fruitful investigation into the significance of the star enactment, such as the commutation test, are re-formulated in this study and their benefits are demonstrated through their application to key Heston star enactments. These new understandings are also made possible through the application of an 'ekphrastic' method of rendering film moments. Previous readings of Heston's star figure are also re-appraised, and their conclusions questioned, through closer reference to the evidence of details from films. The fruitfulness of this method for analysing and commenting on film is thus demonstrated and Heston's relationship to genre and its effect on performance style is also considered in order to be able to confidently assert the specific features of the Heston aesthetic.

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This thesis is dedicated, with his kind permission,  
to Charlton Heston - 1923-2008

## Introduction: Charlton Heston: 'Good Actor'

Towards the end of *Wayne's World 2* (Stephen Surjik, 1993), as the character of Wayne Campbell is engaged in a last-minute race to reclaim his girlfriend, he rushes into a petrol station to ask for directions to the church on Gordon Street where she is about to get married. When he is confronted by a deliberately unconvincing performance by the actor playing the petrol attendant, Wayne / Mike Myers turns away from the attendant and directly addresses the camera, demanding crossly, "Do we have to put up with this? I mean, can't we get a better actor?" The 'bad' actor is then bundled out of shot by a crew member and replaced by none other than Charlton Heston, who immediately starts delivering the line whose performance had so blatantly failed to impress, convince or move Wayne/Myers previously. In his contrastingly 'good' performance Heston repeats the question "Gordon Street?" but, unlike the previous performer, he delivers the lines naturally and convincingly. He speaks quite quickly at first, sounding and looking puzzled as he addresses the off-screen Wayne/Myers, but as he continues he looks away from him and into the middle distance, as if gazing at some remembered past. He chuckles as he slowly says, "Oh yes," in recognition both of the place and his memory of it, smiling widely and raising his eyebrows in appreciation. We hear him continue delivering this line as we cut to a reaction shot of Wayne/Myers, who is also now smiling broadly, sharing in the attendant's happiness at the memory.

Wayne/Myer's smile also suggests, however, the character's more objective enjoyment of Heston's 'good' acting performance in contrast to the 'bad' performance previously witnessed. Our awareness of this enjoyment is enhanced by the way in which we see Wayne/Myers nodding slightly and tilting his head in appreciation when we hear Heston / the attendant delicately and carefully repeat the words "Gordon Street", as if remembering the place and what it means to him. When we cut back to Heston / the attendant, however, his smile is now a closed one, which begins to convey more regret. His gaze is still off into the distance, as if he is lost in his recollections, as he says wistfully, "Long time ago...", and, glancing at Wayne/Myers, "...when I was a young man." He then looks away from Wayne/Myers again, but his gaze is now downcast and he wears a more rueful smile. That smile then straightens as he looks up again into the distance before continuing, in a lower voice, "...not a day passes when I don't think of her..." and, as the line continues, "...and the promise I made, which ...," we cut back to Wayne/Myers and see again the effect on him of both the story and of Heston's performance. In

exaggerated contrast to the first reaction shot, his mouth is now downturned and his bottom lip is wobbling and he appears to be on the verge of tears. His eyes are wide and their expression mournful as he stares at Heston / the attendant, obviously engrossed in what he is saying and feeling. We then cut back to Heston / the attendant who continues the line after a beat with a serious and regretful expression, his eyebrows lowered and drawing together, as he says “[which] I will always keep.” But as he finishes his speech, “... and one perfect day on Gordon Street,” he smiles again, still looking off into the distance at the memory. We then see Heston / the attendant snap out of his reverie, as he abruptly stops smiling and turns to look directly at Wayne/Myers, but he sighs as he makes this movement, which suggests his unwillingness to disengage with the precious memory. He nevertheless gives Wayne/Myers the directions in a matter-of-fact tone and finishes by slapping him companionably on the shoulder. We then cut to the final reaction shot of Wayne/Myers, who appears visibly choked-up with emotion, so much so that he can’t speak to begin with but finally manages to croak “Thank you.” This gratitude can be seen to be as much for the ‘good’ performance, as for the directions, and he then rushes off to continue the film’s plot.

This sequence, albeit ironically, can be seen to raise a number of the methodological and ontological questions about film stars, and the meaning and effects that they convey, with which this thesis is concerned. How to characterise the relationship between film stars and acting, for example, is raised by the way in which a great deal of the humour in this sequence arises from Charlton Heston’s status as an instantly recognisable film star, in contrast to the unknown ‘bad’ actor who is unceremoniously bundled off-screen. This sequence also raises questions about the ways in which film stars create meaning and generate response in films; for although the responses of Wayne/Myers to Heston’s performance are deliberately exaggerated, they nevertheless refer to the complex processes both of alignment and admiration that are simultaneously called upon when a film star acts. Questions are also prompted about the ways in which film acting may be evaluated, and the unwillingness of academic film studies to explicitly produce such judgements, by the film character Wayne’s uncomplicated distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ acting.<sup>1</sup> The very attempt to replicate the details of a film sequence in written form also raises the problem of how the audio-visual features of star performances can be

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<sup>1</sup> As Richard deCordova has suggested, “the actor’s activity . . . has been a principal category through which audiences have read, judged, and appreciated film.” DeCordova, R. (1990) *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 13.

most effectively described in writing. Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, however, the sequence questions just what it means to cast Charlton Heston as a 'Good Actor', as he is described in the credits for *Wayne's World 2*. Is this just another joke in a film whose mode is parody? Or should it rather be seen as evidence of the gulf between popular and highbrow evaluations of Charlton Heston's skill as a screen performer? The status and reputation of Charlton Heston as a film star lie at the centre of this thesis as it seeks to investigate how stars can be posited as a site of meaning production through an examination of Heston's film appearances. Such a project, perhaps controversially, certainly unfashionably, therefore also positions Charlton Heston and his films as objects worthy of study and, in the process, may suggest ways in which Charlton Heston, as *Wayne's World 2* suggests, can be credibly characterised as a 'good actor.'

The primary academic drive behind this investigation is not a desire to valorise the screen appearances of Charlton Heston however, although that may be its not unwelcome outcome. The thesis' main focus and its claim to contribute to major debates in film studies, is its engagement with a perceived lack or failure in star studies. That Star Study has failed in some way has been regularly claimed by writers in the field, to such an extent that Danae Clark has suggested that "the field of star studies is permeated by discourses of lack".<sup>2</sup> What star studies lacks and the specific areas of its failure may be defined very differently depending on the critical approach favoured by each writer, but there does seem to be a consensus that the promise of star studies has been barely realised.<sup>3</sup> It is the contention of this thesis that whilst the centrality of stars to mainstream Hollywood cinema in terms of production and consumption has certainly been rigorously acknowledged and accounted for, the nature and scale of their contribution as a source of aesthetic effects has proven harder to recognise and evaluate.

The methodological direction this investigation chooses to take was inspired by two very different critical passages: the conclusion to Richard Dyer's book-length study *Stars* and Michel Mourlet's

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<sup>2</sup> Clark, D. (1995) *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors' Labor* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis), 1.

<sup>3</sup> McDonald, P. (1995) 'Star Studies' in J. Hollows and M. Jancovich (eds.) *Approaches to Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 80.



comments on Charlton Heston in his article 'In Defence of Violence'.<sup>4</sup> Although these two texts were published twenty years apart, by writers who approached film from radically different critical positions, their comments nevertheless worked together to crystallise my own concerns about the focus and methods of star studies, and to suggest other possible approaches. The concluding comments in Dyer's work, in particular, resonated with my own dissatisfaction as a film scholar with existing approaches to star study and in particular with the lack of a language and method when it came to discussing what constitutes for many film viewers their most intense engagement with film stars: beauty and pleasure. As Dyer explains:

I don't want to privilege these responses over analysis, but equally I don't want, in the rush to analysis, to forget what it is that I am analysing. And I must add that, while I accept utterly that beauty and pleasure are culturally and historically specific, and in no way escape ideology, none the less they are beauty and pleasure and I want to hang on to them in some form or another.<sup>5</sup>

In his conclusion Dyer acknowledges that ideologically focused approaches to film stars (such as those adopted in his own work) can leave issues of legitimate interest such as aesthetics and emotion not only untouched but untouchable. Richard deCordova's suggestion that "film theory has been reluctant to admit the degree to which film stars have defined our experience of cinema," demonstrates how, ten years after Dyer's work was initially published, writers on film stars were still bemoaning film studies' reluctance to acknowledge and accept key aspects of the star's contribution to the cinematic experience.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst it was encouraging to find my own reservations about the limitations of existing approaches to stars reflected in this way, Dyer's comments do not suggest an alternative method through which these neglected features of star study may be recognised and commented on in future. Michel Mourlet's article, however, rather than bewailing a deficiency in existing approaches to stars, offered inspiration

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<sup>4</sup> Dyer, R. (1979) *Stars* (London: BFI publishing). Mourlet's article was first published in French in *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1968; his specific comments on Heston were first quoted in English translation by Colin McArthur in 'The Real Presence' in *Sight and Sound* 36/3 in 1967. They were then re-quoted in *Stars* and the entire article first appeared in English translation in Gledhill, C. (ed.) (1991) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge), 233-236.

<sup>5</sup> Dyer, R. (1998) *Stars: New Edition* (London: British Film Institute), 162.

<sup>6</sup> DeCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 147.

to the writer interested in investigating aesthetics and emotion, not only through its unembarrassed delineation of the film star's beauty, but in its bold claims for the star's contribution to meaning production:

Charlton Heston is an axiom. By himself alone he constitutes a tragedy, and his presence in any film whatsoever suffices to create beauty. The contained violence expressed by the sombre phosphorescence of his eyes, his eagle's profile, the haughty arch of his eyebrows, his prominent cheekbones, the bitter and hard curve of his mouth, the fabulous power of his torso: this is what he possesses and what not even the worst director can degrade.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the number of times this declaration of Mourlet's has been quoted by later writers on film stars, it seems that the methodological challenge it presents, not least through its highly engaged register, has been repeatedly sidestepped. Indeed many critics feel the need to distance themselves from its rhetorical force, as can be seen when Gledhill describes his tone as "at once engaging and disturbing".<sup>8</sup> Far from finding them 'disturbing', however, Mourlet's comments are an inspiration for the methods adopted in this investigation, not only because of their focus on the star's contribution to a film's effects and meanings but also through their more engaged rhetoric. Thus while Dyer articulates the problem or lack in star studies that this thesis is interested in investigating, Mourlet provides inspiration in the search for methodological approaches capable of meeting this challenge.

Although Mourlet's comments were inspired by the film appearances of Charlton Heston, the route by which I came to select Heston as the focus of this investigation was not as obviously direct as my response to his comments may suggest. Although "Why not?" may seem like a flippant response to the question "Why Charlton Heston?", it is also equally valid. Heston is axiomatic in ways other than those suggested by Mourlet. Mark Jancovich, for example, has commented on how Heston's film career coincides with some of the most important developments in post-Paramount Hollywood and, in this more objective vein, an argument is built in Chapter Six of this thesis for the significance of Heston in

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<sup>7</sup> Mourlet, M. (1991) 'In Defence of Violence' in Christine Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London and New York: Routledge), 234.

<sup>8</sup> Gledhill, C. (ed.) (1991) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London and New York: Routledge), xviii.

tracing economic, institutional and stylistic developments in Hollywood during this period.<sup>9</sup> This institutional significance could be equally ascribed to other major film stars of the '50s and '60s, however, and so does not of itself fully justify the specific choice of Heston.

Those approaches that focus on investigating stars through questions of audience identification and desires would no doubt be interested in more personal reasons for the choice of this star, and it has been tempting to consider what may have been the subconscious promptings behind my own critical interest in Heston (as Robin Wood controversially did in the preface to his revised edition of *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*).<sup>10</sup> However, my interest in Charlton Heston can be seen to spring from more traditionally academic impulses. I became aware of the relatively scant attention given to Heston in the academic literature whilst researching Hollywood film stars of the 1950s for a previous study. This academic neglect was particularly evident when compared to the amount of work published on stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland. This struck me as being in direct contrast to the cultural impact of his films and star figure, both at the time the films were made and since. The objective and analytical reasons for choosing Charlton Heston, therefore, are that after having investigated Heston's appearances in epic films in an earlier study my sense is that both his performances, and the films he appeared in, have been neglected or underrated. The low level of Heston's critical reputation and the possible reasons for this status, including his association with middlebrow values, are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, but in this introduction it is sufficient to note that this sense of unjust neglect, coupled with the knowledge that there is still a great deal more to say about Heston and his films, lies behind his selection.

The impetus for this investigation, therefore, can be seen to arise from the conjunction of the neglect of a significant film star (and his films) and a perceived problem with existing methods for engaging with the significances and effects generated by stars in the films in which they appear. For although many investigations into the meanings of film stars and the responses they generate exist in film studies, the processes through which these meanings and responses are generated are often situated outside of

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<sup>9</sup> Jancovich, M. (2004) 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom: Spectacle and Performance in the Development of the Blockbuster' in A. Willis (ed.) *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 51-70.

<sup>10</sup> Wood included thirty-three pages of autobiography in this preface in order to undertake, "An examination (and exposure) of the various factors (historical, cultural, personal) that underlie and determine the kind of criticism that one writes," in (2002) *Hitchcock's Films Revisited: Revised Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press), ix.

the star's specific interventions. So Richard deCordova, for example, chooses to focus on the published discourse around the film actor, rather than on the formal properties of the actor's appearances in films, when investigating how film actors contribute to a film's meanings and pleasures, explaining that "a formal analysis would not be able to take these factors that are extrinsic to film form into account, but ... they are very much a part of the film's enunciative apparatus."<sup>11</sup>

This relative neglect of features of film form in star studies is due in part to the dominance of what have been called 'grand' or 'totalising' theories, the application of which are now being questioned.<sup>12</sup> David Bordwell introduced the term 'grand theories' to describe the two approaches to studying film that he suggests have dominated its recent history and which derive alternately from Marxist-inspired cultural materialism and Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>13</sup> What Bordwell identifies as the major problem with these approaches to film mirrors my own concerns with the ways in which these totalising theories have been applied to studying stars, as substituting the term 'star' for 'film' in his following comments makes clear:

Rather than formulating a question, posing a problem, or trying to come to grips with an intriguing [star], the writer often takes as the central task the proving of a theoretical position by adducing [stars] as examples.<sup>14</sup>

Bordwell's objection to this theoretical cart-before-the-horse approach can be applied even more strongly to many examples of writing in star study in which stars are frequently 'adduced' in this way to prove psychological theories around 'subject-positioning' or the ideological significance of representations. Thus an investigation of Rosalind Russell's appearance in *Auntie Mame* reveals that it allowed audiences to "gain a sense of how femininity is fabricated and performed" and Rudolph Valentino's career is seen to "illuminate the basic discrepancy between the penis and its symbolic

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<sup>11</sup> DeCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Bordwell, D. and N. Carroll (eds) (1996) *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press), and Gledhill, C. and L. Williams (eds) (2000) *Reinventing Film Studies* (London: Arnold).

<sup>13</sup> "I try to delineate two large-scale trends of thought: subject position theory and culturalism." D. Bordwell (1996) 'Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory' in D. Bordwell, and N. Carroll (eds) *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press), 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

representation, the phallus".<sup>15</sup> The reasons why these two approaches to analysing film stars have often proved lacking are discussed in more detail in Chapter One.

Although Bordwell and Carroll do not explicitly propose a new approach to replace the 'grand theories' to which they object, it is noticeable that many of the essays in *Post-Theory* use terms and concepts from cognitive psychology. The broader nature of the new approaches developing from this reaction against totalising theories is thus perhaps better characterised by the selection of essays in Gledhill and Williams' *Reinventing Film Studies*, in which a wider and more eclectic range are evident.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever new methods are adopted they do share certain features, however, for as Gledhill suggests, they "all agree that the kind of theorising about cinema that needs to be done today must be more concretely located and ... historicised".<sup>17</sup> And whilst this investigation will not be adopting Bordwell and Carrolls' cognitive science approach, their call for 'middle-level research' which attempts to answer small-scale questions through sharply focussed, in-depth enquiries aligns very well with approaches that are developed and applied in this thesis.<sup>18</sup>

It is necessary, however, for this thesis to posit a different understanding of how films signify, if it is to work outside these 'grand theories'; a problem Bordwell and Carroll's collection deliberately avoids, as 'interpretation' is not the aim of the majority of its essays.<sup>19</sup> Rather than embracing a new 'grand theory' however, this thesis chooses to adopt and adapt theoretical underpinnings for its readings and analyses in a piecemeal way from a variety of approaches. Ideas from Vivian Sobchack's application of phenomenology to the film experience are developed, as well as practices from the more traditional interpretive approaches championed by V.F. Perkins. Although these two writers do not share the same philosophical views, their interest in aesthetics and the bodily experience of the film viewer suit

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<sup>15</sup> Hendler, J. (2004) 'Contesting the Feminine Mystique: Rosalind Russell, *Auntie Mame* and Gender Performativity' in A. Willis (ed.) *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 46 and M. Hansen (1991) 'Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship' in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge), 277.

<sup>16</sup> Gledhill, C. and L. Williams (eds) (2000) *Reinventing Film Studies* (London: Arnold).

<sup>17</sup> *Reinventing Film Studies*, *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> "Sharply focused, in-depth inquiry remains our best bet for producing the sort of scholarly debate that will advance our knowledge of cinema." Bordwell, 'Contemporary Film Studies' in *Post-Theory*, 29-30.

<sup>19</sup> "As the reader may expect, the de-emphasis of dazzling readings of particular films is an intentional gambit on the part of the editors." Bordwell and Carroll, *Post-Theory*, xvii.

the needs of this investigation and allow for issues of beauty and pleasure, as well as meaning, to be effectively addressed and discussed. As Sobchack argues:

In the context of current theoretical practice, it is not only optimistic but also responsible to recognize that the spectator's uniquely situated and contingent vision intentionally shapes the signs and meaning of the film's vision.<sup>20</sup>

My own instinct that a fuller understanding of the star as a cinematic phenomenon would emerge from an approach with a closer focus on the details of film moments and sequences also finds more specific support in work calling for a renewed focus on aspects of film style and aesthetics.<sup>21</sup> Gibbs and Pye, for example, argue that "grounding writing about film in observable detail should be fundamental not to just one form of critical practice but to all, and not just to criticism but to theory".<sup>22</sup> This insistence is all the more relevant when one considers some of the confident conclusions that have been drawn about Heston's meanings as a film star that even a cursory examination of film details may put into doubt.<sup>23</sup> Thus the methods adopted in this thesis can be seen to be more in sympathy with those writers who adopt an aesthetic approach to film analysis, one based on the careful delineation of features of film style and "anchored in the specific material choices evident within the films".<sup>24</sup> A concomitant criticism of previous approaches that may account for their failure and lack, can also be seen to arise from the paucity of formal analysis of film sequences to support the 'grand' conclusions drawn within them, for, as Sheldon Hall suggests:

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<sup>20</sup> Sobchack, V. (1992) *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 307.

<sup>21</sup> In (1999) 'A Star Performs: Mr. March, Mr. Mason and Mr. Maine' in A. Lovell and P. Kramer (eds) *Screen Acting* (London: Routledge), 59-74. Roberta E. Pearson defines her use of the term 'scene' "rather loosely as exhibiting a certain unity of time and space" and this is the understanding of 'sequence' used in this investigation. The term 'moment' is used to describe a much shorter amount of time encompassing an action, movement, gesture or facial expression.

<sup>22</sup> Gibbs, J. and D. Pye (eds) (2005) *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 5.

<sup>23</sup> Leon Hunt, for example, in (1993) 'What are Big Boys Made of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic' in P. Kirkham and J. Thumin (eds) *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* (London: Lawrence and Wishart) produces a deliberate misreading of a line of dialogue in *El Cid* in order to support his assertion of a homoerotic subtext to the film.

<sup>24</sup> Gibbs, J. and D. Pye (eds) (2005) *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press), 12.

One of the ways . . . in which some readings are (and can be seen to be) more valid than others is in the degree of their attentiveness to the particularities of actual texts, and the degree to which claims about them can be verified by close reference to those texts.<sup>25</sup>

In Chapter Two, therefore, I develop the argument that filling the star-shaped hole, which such a lack of attentiveness leads to, demands more detailed description and analysis of specific film moments than is found in many existing works on stardom, and that such description and analysis needs to be placed at the centre of investigations into stars rather than being utilised in a merely illustrative and occasionally distorted way.

In order to describe the object of this investigation more clearly the term 'star enactment' is introduced in Chapter Two. The academic inspiration for this term and the aspects of the star phenomenon it covers are explained in more detail in the chapter, but the key reason for the adoption of this term to describe the nature of intervention of the star in the film is that terms like 'performance' or 'acting' lack specificity. This is particularly evident when it comes to acknowledging the distinction between the star's contribution to a film's meanings and effects in contrast to that of other film performers. I argue that there is an ontological specificity to star enactments which the term 'performance' occludes: in particular the circulation of other kinds of knowledge and understanding that the star's appearance insists upon.<sup>26</sup> Thus the 'bad' actor in *Wayne's World 2* can be said to *perform* performing badly but Heston *enacts* a whole cultural history of previous appearances and audience knowledge from the second he appears on screen and from the moment he is recognised. For these reasons the term 'star enactment' is used when describing and analysing the moment in which the viewer encounters the filmed performance of the star, but this term is also adopted in order to recognise all the filmic and institutional interventions that have led up to the star enactment's moment of projection. These interventions include processes whereby the film itself can be seen to enact the star, processes such as framing, editing and lighting which foreground and privilege the star's appearance and performance. The use of the term star enactment, therefore, allows for all these interventions to be acknowledged when analysing the star's appearance and avoids privileging some of them (those that may be termed

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<sup>25</sup> Hall, S. (2001) 'The Wrong Sort of Cinema: Refashioning the Heritage Film Debate' in R. Murphy (ed.) *The British Cinema Book 2<sup>nd</sup> edn* (London: BFI Publishing), 197.

<sup>26</sup> See most recently, Drake, P. (2006) 'Reconceptualising Screen Performance' in *Journal of Film and Video*, 58, 1-2, 84-92.

'performance elements' for example) over others when considering how a star creates meanings and generates effects within films.

The process of selecting and applying an appropriate form of language and rhetorical style when rendering star enactments in writing is another methodological issue addressed in Chapter Two. Claims repeatedly found in writing on stars that film acting and/or performance is impossible to effectively describe and analyse are necessarily disputed in this chapter, and examples of the numerous schemas and frameworks for describing film performances that have been suggested and applied by previous writers are evaluated. For reasons that are discussed in detail in the chapter, a version of the ekphrastic method of evoking film performances and their effects, as suggested by Stern and Kouvaros in their edited collection, *Falling for You*, is developed for use in the rest of the thesis.<sup>27</sup> The strengths of this method for developing the kinds of insights into aesthetics and emotion that this thesis is interested in are also detailed, in particular its rhetorical power to render film moments more vividly for the reader. This ekphrastic method allows the writer to trace the ways in which, as Vivian Sobchack puts it, "significance and the act of signifying are *directly* felt, *sensuously* available to the viewer".<sup>28</sup> This chapter also explains the overall structure of the thesis, explaining how the diachronic comparative categories of genre can be used to develop a more detailed and nuanced understanding of Heston's star enactments.

As well as investigating the most fruitful methodological approaches for investigating the film star as a site of meaning production, however, this thesis is also concerned to establish Charlton Heston and his films as worthy objects of study. The reasons for Heston's neglect and/or disparagement within academic film studies specifically, and cultural discourses generally, are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. The thesis aims to establish the features of what is designated, after Michel Mourlet, 'the Heston aesthetic', in order to move beyond the deficiencies of existing readings of Heston's films and enactments and, in contrast, to take Heston and his films seriously. This is achieved in the chapter through investigating what has been previously suggested by writers about both Heston's meanings

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<sup>27</sup> Stern, L. and G. Kouvaros (eds) (1999) *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* (Sydney: Power Publications).

<sup>28</sup> Sobchack, V. (1992) *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 8.



and performance style, and testing the validity of these readings against the evidence of actual film sequences. This method of proceeding also works to demonstrate more specifically the weaknesses which are highlighted in Chapter One of those culturalist approaches to stars which focus exclusively on issues of representation and to demonstrate the benefits of rigorously referring to detailed analysis of film sequences when investigating film stars. Through this process, and with reference to many of Heston's appearances in films that have not previously been commented on in detail, this chapter aims to produce a more well-supported and nuanced understanding of the Heston aesthetic than has previously been delineated. The term 'star aesthetic' thus replaces the culturalist concepts of star persona and image by focusing more exclusively on features of form and style in the star's film appearances and giving far less weight to other cultural discourses. The star aesthetic that is identified in this way then provides a reliable comparative element through which the analyses of the following chapters can develop.

The remaining three chapters are used to apply these methods and findings to a range of Heston's star enactments which are selected to allow for fruitful contrasts and comparisons and which, in turn, allow for confident conclusions to be drawn about Heston's role as a signifying phenomenon in the films. This is work that meets Marian Keane's call for 'pre-theoretical writing' which is how she describes "writing not dedicated to demonstrating or proving 'theory'" but to defining the significance of the star's appearance in film and articulating the nature of its mattering.<sup>29</sup> These chapters are also designed to move from a close to a wider focus as the investigation develops, calling on genre to help reveal the nature and effect of the star figure's interventions in the film. Thus a close analysis of a sequence from *El Cid* is used in Chapter Four to demonstrate the strengths and insights an ekphrastic approach offers for rendering star enactments in academic writing. In it Heston's performance style is investigated through a consideration of previous criticisms of it and a more subtle characterisation of it is arrived at through an ekphrastic rendering of a key sequence from the film. The writing models adopted in this chapter are rhetorical and engaged, rather than objective and distanced, and inspired by the material rather than imposed upon it.

Once features of Heston's performance style have been delineated through this focus on a single scene, the factors that contribute to it are further investigated in Chapter Five through the synchronic

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<sup>29</sup> Keane, M. (1993) 'Dyer Straits: Theoretical Issues in Studies of Film Acting' in *Post Script*, 12/2, 38.

comparison that the practice of commutation offers. Commutation as an approach in star studies is closely interrogated in this chapter and the specific application of the technique used in the thesis is justified. This leads into the commutation of the enactments of Heston and Kirk Douglas in 'testing scenes' from epic films. The benefits of this approach are demonstrated through the detailed analysis which results, and the way in which conclusions can both be drawn and supported in detail. Chapter Six uses genre categories to introduce a diachronic element to the analysis of Heston's performance style and aesthetic. This consists of considering Heston's appearances in science-fiction films and disaster movies and investigating the complex interactions that can thus be traced between star enactment and genre. The meanings and effects produced by the star enactments are thus isolated by various synchronic and diachronic contrasts throughout the thesis in order to produce a robust delineation of the Heston aesthetic and the features that produce it, thereby acknowledging the ways in which the star enactment generates meaning and response.

Bordwell suggests that middle-level research asks questions that have both an empirical and theoretical impact and the main concerns of this thesis can be seen to echo this distinction.<sup>30</sup> For through investigating how stars generally, and Heston specifically, can be posited as a signifying phenomenon, the thesis engages with theoretical and methodological debates. However, it also seeks to establish Heston and his films as objects worthy of study and can thus be seen to be more empirically driven. The theoretical investigation is made possible methodologically through a focus on the star enactment as it is rendered through ekphrasis, and then further delineated through comparison with other analytical categories such as genre. The Heston aesthetic on the other hand, is established through re-assessing what has been previously suggested about Heston's 'meaning' and performance style and investigating empirically how well those claims stand up to detailed scrutiny.

It should be acknowledged in the introduction to this investigation that the small-scale and delimited nature of the questions posed mean that it is not intended to offer definitive answers to broader questions about film stardom as a whole. Its focus is limited to one film star, Charlton Heston; and one institutional setting, Hollywood between the late 1950s and early 1970s. The methodology used and the conclusions drawn are therefore specific to the questions raised by Heston's star enactments and their significances. This is not necessarily a weakness, however, if it encourages future studies of stars

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<sup>30</sup> Bordwell, D. and N. Carroll (eds) (1996) *Post-Theory*, 27.

to search out and apply methods that are specific to the star under scrutiny. If we can begin by acknowledging those aspects of the star phenomenon that have not yet been adequately described in star studies, we will be some way towards identifying the new approaches that will need to be developed and applied in a study that hopes to engage with those very features.

## One The Star-Shaped Hole at the Centre of Star Study

*The promise of star studies . . . was that it might allow one to address the organisation of the industry, the properties of individual texts, and the experiences of the audience and to relate all three within a small and coherent focus. - Paul McDonald*

As was acknowledged in the introduction this study must begin with a consideration of the previously dominant approaches to star study in order to unpick the reasons why the aspects of film stars that this thesis is interested in investigating are not usefully addressed by their methods and theories. Such a consideration will also allow, however, for a recognition of the insights such work has led to and a rationale for the adaptation of some of their ideas and methods in the investigation that follows. These dominant approaches are usefully summarised by Paul McDonald through his distinction between those that address the organisation of the industry and those that focus on the experiences of the audience.<sup>31</sup> This division of approaches could also be seen to mirror Bordwell and Carroll's wider distinction between the two 'grand theories' of cultural materialism and psychoanalysis; with production-centred approaches to stars generally reflecting Marxist concerns and Freudian theories driving audience-centred ones. The reality is, however, that no such neat divide can be drawn as terminology and assumptions from both 'grand theories' are often integrated in the same critical work.<sup>32</sup> There are also studies, found in both consumption- and production-centred investigations, which also rely on empirical evidence and whose methods therefore may be more fairly described as historical or ethnographic. Whatever theoretical alignments may be discerned within them however, a distinction between those approaches which consider the star as a phenomenon of production and those for whom it is a phenomenon of consumption, is a methodologically useful one, in so far as it allows this

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<sup>31</sup> McDonald, P. (1995) 'Star Studies' in J. Hollows and M. Jancovich (eds) *Approaches to Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 80.

<sup>32</sup> Bordwell suggests "there are deep continuities of doctrine and practice" between the two approaches. "Film Studies and Grand Theory" in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press), 13.

chapter to investigate their respective insights and assumptions in a coherent and enlightening manner.

### **The Star as a Phenomenon of Production**

Investigating the star as a phenomenon of production emerged in institutional histories of the development of the American film industry and the questions this approach is interested in answering therefore are ones concerning the industry as a whole, of which the star phenomenon is seen as only one part. Taking its terminology and theoretical underpinnings from cultural materialism, its interest in stardom is clearly focused on what institutional and economic factors can be seen to be responsible for producing the phenomenon of the film star. In practice this means that such studies often focus on the operation of the entire star system rather than situating their analysis at the level of the individual star.<sup>33</sup> This approach also entails considering how the star system fitted into the methods of production adopted by the Hollywood industry at various points in its history, which does allow these studies to acknowledge the influence of the star system on the form and content of the films themselves. Tino Balio, for example, describes how “the economic importance of stars . . . had influenced the development of the classical Hollywood style” during the studio period, when the “screenplay, sets, costumes, lighting, and makeup of a picture were designed to enhance a star’s screen persona”.<sup>34</sup>

Another useful aspect of this approach is its offer of an objective and empirical definition of the film star through the evidence offered by industrial practices such as billing, contracts and other economic arrangements between the studios and their stars. Focusing on industrial practices in this way can also reveal how the film star has occupied an ambiguous position in the economic structures of the American film industry from its earliest beginnings, as film studios and production companies have found the phenomenon of the film star to be as much of a challenge as an asset to their various strategies for controlling the film business. The institutionally ambiguous position afforded the film star is evident throughout the history of the American film industry, from the initial reluctance of some producers to name their players at all to the contractual battles between stars and studios of the

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<sup>33</sup> Holmes, S.P. (2000) ‘The Hollywood Star System and the Regulation of Actors’ Labor, 1916–1934’, *Film History*, 12, 97.

<sup>34</sup> Balio, T. (1995) *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 143, 144.

Thirties and Forties.

Given its focus on stardom as an institutional practice, it is unsurprising that this approach has produced many investigations into the first instance of a film performer's name appearing in both film credits and publicity. This moment has always been seen as a crucial one in the emergence of film stars, for it is only with the linking of the face on screen to the name of the performer that stardom becomes possible.<sup>35</sup> Writers attempting to account for this development from an institutional perspective, therefore, focus on investigating both the conditions of production and discourses of promotion that prevailed at the time. Janet Staiger's historical account is particularly aimed at debunking the explanations that had previously been widely accepted as accounting for the first example of the naming of a film performer. These earlier accounts posited the simplistic and flawed thesis that the practice emerged as a weapon in the economic battle between independent and trust film producers; a thesis which, as she ably demonstrates, the facts do not support. Her essentially corrective account, perhaps wisely, doesn't offer an alternative argument to replace the one it refutes to account for the emergence of stars for, as she warns, the misreadings of the facts she uncovers were motivated by "the interests of ... larger arguments".<sup>36</sup> But it is important to note here that the assumption was that the development of the phenomenon of film stardom was both producer led and in their interests.

Richard deCordova, however, does suggest an alternative hypothesis to explain the emergence of the film star during the historical period 1907-1914, arguing that the figure of the film star allowed the fledgling film industry to position itself as morally healthy in contrast to its nearest business rival, the theatre.<sup>37</sup> This, in turn, increased its appeal to the middle-class audience who were believed to embrace such family values and had been less enthusiastic about cinema-going up to this point than the working classes. DeCordova seems to have avoided the danger of allowing his larger argument to

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<sup>35</sup> Although, as Richard de Cordova has demonstrated, this was a complex process in which a transitional category of the *picture personality* can be identified before the full-blown star phenomenon developed. DeCordova, R. (1990) *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press).

<sup>36</sup> Staiger, J. (1991) 'Seeing Stars' in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge), 6.

<sup>37</sup> "The discourse on the star involved a work that disassociated the film star from this aspect of the theatrical tradition. What was undoubtedly at stake here was reformist concern about the healthfulness of the cinema as an institution." DeCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 102.

distort or downplay the historical facts, but at the cost of producing quite a small-scale and context-specific answer to the question, as he himself acknowledges.<sup>38</sup>

Other writers have highlighted the effect of the emergence of narrative film as the dominant form during this period on the process for, as Eileen Bowser points out, “before there could be movie stars, they had to be close enough to the camera to be recognised from one picture to the next”.<sup>39</sup> The role of the film star in the development and popularity of the narrative film at this crucial juncture has not been investigated in great detail, however, although its significance has been acknowledged:

It would be interesting to explore the affinities in this period between the organisation of these narratives around the position of the spectator and the psychology of narrative character, the development of the continuity style, and the role and presentation of the star on screen.<sup>40</sup>

Although the reasons for the emergence of stars suggested by these writers do not explain the continued existence and success of the star system in later historical periods, their studies do illuminate the importance of stars to the industry from its earliest beginnings. The debate over when and how the film star phenomenon began may still be ongoing but the suggestion that it was part of a campaign to win or maintain audiences demonstrates how production-centred approaches can raise vital questions about the star's role in mediating between institutions and audiences. The fact that some film companies resisted the naming and promotion of film stars for a number of years after it became a widespread industry practice also reminds us that film stardom is not necessarily, or merely, an invention and tool of film producers.<sup>41</sup>

The production-centred approach has also been applied to the investigation of other eras than that

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<sup>38</sup> “A great deal of work needs to be done on the apparent failure of this regulation in the star scandals of the early twenties.” Ibid., 2.

<sup>39</sup> Bowser, E. (1990) *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 110. Tom Gunning makes a similar point: “the narrator system, with its increased characterisation and techniques for creating empathy, made [the film actor] an individual and created the paradox of an unknown star” in (1994) *D.W. Griffiths and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press), 219.

<sup>40</sup> Donald, J. (2008) ‘The Hollywood Star Machine’ in P. Cook (ed.) *The Cinema Book 3<sup>rd</sup> edn* (London: British Film Institute), 111.

<sup>41</sup> “Why Biograph resisted the tidal wave of audience love for the players three years longer than the other producers still remains difficult to understand.” Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, 108.

which saw the concurrent emergence of the Hollywood film industry and the star system. Much work has focused on the economic and contractual arrangements that formed the star system during the mature oligopoly of the studio era. There are many advantages for the scholar interested in investigating stardom in this era of film production, as the studios archived detailed records of all aspects of their business and where these survive they allow for thorough production-centred investigations. The studio system's adoption of scientific production methods, including the specialised division of labour, also seems to offer the scholar an objective definition of the film star, in contrast to the more theoretical and therefore contestable definitions which are used in consumption-centred approaches. The studio practice of offering different kinds of contracts, publicity, and film roles to their performers based on their categorisation as star, featured player, stock player, or supporting player, for example; and their differentiation between A and B pictures in production schedules, suggests not only which players were and were not stars but even how important a star they were.<sup>42</sup>

The economic problem identified by early film producers who resisted the rise of film stars in the early cinema period (which Bowser formulated as “why advertise actors who will leave?”) was therefore solved to a large extent by the contracts that the studios offered to prospective stars from the late 1920s.<sup>43</sup> The ‘option contract’ tied the player to their studio for up to seven years with no chance of changing employer, whilst giving the studio the option to cancel it every six months. Balio is quite clear about the effect of these production strategies, stating that by 1930 “the conversion to sound and the ordeal of the depression left the star system firmly in the grip of the producers”.<sup>44</sup> It has been a central tenet of production-centred understandings of the star system that this ‘star system’ fulfilled key economic imperatives for the Hollywood film industry. This understanding is usefully summarised by Balio who argues:

Because a star provided an insurance policy of sorts and a production value, as well as a prestigious trademark for a studio, the star system became the prime means of stabilizing the

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<sup>42</sup> Balio, T. (1995) *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 155.

<sup>43</sup> Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, 108.

<sup>44</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 143.



motion-picture business.<sup>45</sup>

A good example of these assumptions at work is found in Cathy Klaprat's investigation into 'The Star as Market Strategy', in which she uses Bette Davis' career at Warner Bros. as a case study.<sup>46</sup> Klaprat emphasises the determining power of the economic institutions of Hollywood from the outset of her argument when she states categorically that "stars were created, not discovered, counter to popular myths".<sup>47</sup> Through tracing how Bette Davis was cast and promoted she aims to demonstrate how studios matched stars to narratives in order to differentiate their products, arguing that:

With *Dangerous*, the process of fitting actor to character is completed. In economic terms, we can say the differentiation of the star in the correct narrative role determined by audience response created a market for the film.<sup>48</sup>

This belief in economic determinism is shared by Barry King, and his understanding of the star as a figure that includes both labour and capital in one site is a very useful economic distinction for such an ultimately nebulous concept. This conceptualization leads him to suggest that the reason for the continuation of the star system during the studio era is that "essentially the star system is the form of competition between the majors that is consistent with the stabilisation of monopoly control".<sup>49</sup> His analysis recognises only economic or material factors as having any genuine power over forms of production and therefore, for King, power and influence inevitably lie with those who control production, in this case the studios. He does acknowledge, however, the conflicts that can arise between star and studio, a situation which he describes as occurring when "a legal monopoly confronts a physical or natural monopoly in a bargaining relationship".<sup>50</sup> Stars who have been investigated from this more conflict-focused perspective include James Cagney in 'Declarations of Independence: A History of Cagney Productions' and Bette Davis in 'A Triumph of Bitchery: Warner Bros, Bette Davis and

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<sup>45</sup> Balio, *Grand Designs*, 144.

<sup>46</sup> Klaprat, K. (1985) 'The Star as Market Strategy: Bette Davis in Another Light' in T. Balio (ed.) *The American Film Industry, revised edition* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 351-352.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

<sup>49</sup> King, B. (1985) 'Stardom as Occupation' in P. Kerr (ed.) *The Hollywood Film Industry: A Reader* (London: Routledge), 157.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

*Jezebel*.<sup>51</sup> As the titles of these studies imply, they focus on stars who found themselves in conflict with their studio employers over both the terms of their contracts and decisions about casting. The way this economic negotiation tends to be dramatised as a David against Goliath struggle can be seen in the emotive terms Schatz chooses to describe it: “Davis overcame that perception and *carved* out a niche for herself... *battling* the *entrenched* Warner's system” (my italics).<sup>52</sup> This focus on the stars' autonomy and their techniques for controlling their careers can thus be seen to challenge the more economically determinist views of King and Klaprat.

Recent production-centred investigations following King's lead, however, have moved on from investigating individual stars and have become more interested in considering the star *system* as part of a wider studio-instigated method for controlling their labour force. Sean Holmes suggests, for example, that the star system was as much a tool for breaking worker solidarity as it was a method of controlling the market for films, as “by elevating a small minority of performers at the expense of the struggling majority, it fragmented the acting community and forestalled the emergence of a sense of shared oppression”.<sup>53</sup> This understanding has led to a broadening of focus in work on the star system to include the conditions of all players employed under the studio system. Stars are therefore considered as a small minority and not necessarily deserving of the disproportionate attention they have so far received in academic study:

An ideological complicity with capitalist relations of power . . . has stunted a thorough examination of the star system and caused scholars to focus their attention only on stars as opposed to workers further down in the labor hierarchy.<sup>54</sup>

Although this may be the logical conclusion for production-centred approaches, it demonstrates how the interests and focus of such an approach are not useful for illuminating further the star phenomenon for the purposes of this thesis.

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<sup>51</sup> Hagopian, K. (1986) ‘Declarations of Independence: A History of Cagney Productions’, *The Velvet Light Trap*, 22, 16-22, and Schatz, T. (1988) ‘A Triumph of Bitchery: Warner Bros., Bette Davis and *Jezebel*’, *Wide Angle*, 10, 1, 16-29.

<sup>52</sup> Schatz, ‘A Triumph of Bitchery’, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Holmes, S.P. (2000) ‘The Hollywood Star System and the Regulation of Actors’ Labor, 1916-1934’, *Film History*, 12, 99.

<sup>54</sup> Clark, D. (1995) *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors’ Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), xii.

Perhaps unsurprisingly a great deal of work on the star system has focused on the studio era and Paul McDonald has pointed out that “there is a lack of historical research on what happened to the Hollywood star system after the breakdown of the vertically integrated studios”.<sup>55</sup> King, however, *has* commented on the effects of this economic transition. Because for King all the practices of stardom can be directly linked to the circumstances of production he sees it as inevitable that stardom as a phenomenon would undergo major changes, along with every other aspect of Hollywood production, post 1949. He characterises the changes to the conditions of stardom at this time as a change from real to formal subsumption of labour in which there was a “relaxation of the strategy of control by means of a univocal emphasis on star image and a corresponding emergent emphasis on the projection of character”.<sup>56</sup> He also uses the concept of autonomy to contrast the new kinds of stars this change produced to those that had prevailed under the studio system. Clark Gable, whose career coincided with the height of the studio system, is thus seen as an example of a low-autonomy star whereas Burt Lancaster, who rose to fame post-Paramount and established his own production company, is seen as having high autonomy. King's comment that “Lancaster has been less content to be a personality and has sought the accolade of 'actor', whereas Gable certainly did not” demonstrates how the different approaches to performance and role discernible in these two stars' careers exemplify the differences these levels of autonomy are supposed to have on star figures.<sup>57</sup> Despite referring to two specific examples of film stars and commenting on their individual decisions, however, King makes it clear that he believes “it is the state of economic organization, and not the intention of specific stars, that makes these strategies dominant or subordinate options”.<sup>58</sup> In this way he is able to extend his understanding of the determining power of the industry to the different forms of stardom that existed after the end of the studio system.

King's desire for such totalising conclusions, and his belief in the determining power of economic

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<sup>55</sup> McDonald, P. (2000) *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities* (London: Wallflower Press), 116.

<sup>56</sup> King, 'Stardom as Occupation', *ibid.*, 169. King argues that “the real subsumption process operating within stardom will lead to a ... tendency to enforce an overlap between the star image and character.” 'Stardom as Occupation', 68.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

structures, can be seen to oversimplify the star system both pre and post the dismantling of the studio system however. As the examples of Cagney and Davis show, real subsumption was by no means smoothly maintained by the means of production during the studio era, nor is it difficult to find examples of star figures in the post-studio era in which there is "an overlap between the star image and character, such that all potential characters are reduced to one transfilmic star personality image" and who therefore fit King's definition of low-autonomy stars.<sup>59</sup> Similar misgivings can be directed at Klaprat's account of the development of Davis' star image at Warner Bros. She never once acknowledges Davis' disputes with her employers over the kind of roles she was offered, ignoring Davis' suspensions in 1934 for example, and preferring to see the star as having no control or influence over her casting and roles. Even the economic principles of her argument can be challenged for, as McDonald has pointed out, individual stars have rarely ever "maintained a consistent record at the box office," and they therefore cannot be so confidently asserted to provide either a consistent economic value or mechanism for manipulating the market.<sup>60</sup>

Despite these misgivings, production-centred investigations nevertheless demonstrate how investigating the contractual details of stars' dealings with producers can reveal insights into stardom as an economic strategy. These kinds of insights are also evident in Mark Jancovich's overview of the star figure of Charlton Heston, which considers the star in relation to a whole range of institutional contexts, including his contract and his generic configurations.<sup>61</sup> Heston's career, according to Jancovich, "provides an exemplary instance through which to track the post-war American cinema, both in industrial and ideological terms" because it "almost perfectly coincides with Hollywood's post-war transformation and with the development of the blockbuster".<sup>62</sup> Production-centred approaches, therefore, can produce important insights into the ways stars may be used by producers to attempt to stabilise both the market and the work force. This approach also engages with the different economic

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<sup>59</sup> King, 168. One could propose Julia Roberts and Harrison Ford as examples of such contemporary low-autonomy stars.

<sup>60</sup> McDonald, *The Star System*, 53.

<sup>61</sup> Jancovich, M. (2004) 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom: Spectacle and Performance in the Development of the Blockbuster' in A. Willis (ed.) *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 51-70.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 51. These conclusions are interrogated further in Chapter Three of this thesis.

and institutional configurations of stardom throughout the development of Hollywood. In this way the often trans-historic notion of stardom as a permanently given and understood category can be usefully destabilised and the very specific meanings and institutions of stardom in different historical periods can be recognised. The dangerous simplifications that can arise from not addressing these specificities explicitly when investigating stars and stardom are therefore usefully highlighted.

Due to their historical focus and interest in the star *system* rather than the star *phenomenon*, however, investigations into the star as a phenomenon of production tend not to pay much attention to the star's actual appearances in individual films. Their necessarily broad historical sweep means generalisations tend to be drawn about stars from the roles they play, rather than the performances they give. Thus Hagopian refers to "Cagney's name and screen personality as a fast talking tough guy," and Paul McDonald suggests that "Meg Ryan frequently appears in roles as the ever-so-slightly-dizzy romantic".<sup>63</sup> When discussing *El Cid* (1961, Anthony Mann) Jancovich goes so far as to suggest that "the film is able to convert some of Heston's most profound weaknesses as an actor into strengths", thus finding the production of meaning at the point of casting and role rather than in the star's performance.<sup>64</sup> Jancovich's attitude here chimes with King's assertion that:

While film increases the centrality of the actor in the process of signification, the formative capacity of the medium can equally confine the actor more and more to being a bearer of effects that he or she does not or cannot originate.<sup>65</sup>

Considering the star as a phenomenon of production therefore results in confining the star to being a symptom of what is being studied and not the primary object of study itself. As McDonald himself recognises in his own survey of this field, "studies of stars as a phenomenon of production have tended to focus on the former without adequately attending to the latter".<sup>66</sup> One reason which can now be identified for the star-shaped hole at the centre of star studies is that a focus on production rather than allowing conclusions to be drawn about individual stars, often leads instead to conclusions about

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<sup>63</sup> Hagopian, 'Declarations of Independence', 18 and McDonald, *The Star System*, 94.

<sup>64</sup> Jancovich, 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom', 65.

<sup>65</sup> King, B. (1991) 'Articulating Stardom' in J.G. Butler (ed.) *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 145.

<sup>66</sup> McDonald, *The Star System*, 119.

Hollywood as an institution specifically and the nature of capitalist production generally. So, for example, McDonald's conclusion to his work on the star system argues that:

The tensions witnessed over the control of star images do not represent stars attempting to challenge or oppose the capitalist logic of the film industry but rather to become something more than just labour by recognising and consolidating their status as capital.<sup>67</sup>

That this is the logical extension of such an approach is admitted by Danae Clark when she explains her belief that a production-centred analysis "should embrace the conditions and struggles of actors at all levels of the star system hierarchy" and therefore "this book is not about stars".<sup>68</sup>

### **The Star as a Phenomenon of Consumption**

Although King dismisses any belief in audience autonomy, stating "one is implicitly challenging alternative definitions that see stardom as created, not out of the exigencies of controlling the production and marketing of films, but rather by popular selection," one of the opposing hypotheses to production-centred accounts to explain the emergence of the star system suggests that, on the contrary, the naming of stars was an industry reaction to audience demands.<sup>69</sup> This view is supported by Eileen Bowser who contends that "when the public insisted on their interest in star players, the industry at first declined to exploit it".<sup>70</sup> In contrast to deCordova, she sees the naming and promotion of stars as being driven by the public against an, at times, reluctant industry:

A ground swell of public interest in the movie actors began to appear in letters to the moving-picture studios and trade periodicals and in the daily conversations a good theater manager had with his customers. . . . It was the public who harangued the theater managers with questions about their favorites, who wrote to studios, who asked for photographs, who sent in proposals of marriage and less proper invitations.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> McDonald, 119-120.

<sup>68</sup> Clark, D. (1995) *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors' Labor* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press), xi and ix.

<sup>69</sup> King, 'Stardom as an Occupation', 155.

<sup>70</sup> Bowser, E. (1990) *The Transformation of Cinema 1907-1915* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press), 106.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 107-8.

This account of the emergence of stars highlights the division in star studies between those who see the star as a phenomenon of production and those for whom it is a phenomenon of consumption. For the latter a focus on the star phenomenon allows for investigations into the experience and/or needs and desires of the audience, and any meaning and signification associated with the star is therefore seen to arise at the point of consumption. The agency for the meanings and significances thus identified are usually traced to the audience's psyche or, more broadly, to systems of ideology. This has led to a focus in such work on stars as representations of various social formations such as race, gender and sexuality.

Studying stars in this way, as signs of audience needs and desires, was pioneered by Richard Dyer in his seminal text *Stars*.<sup>72</sup> This work played a pivotal role in establishing and defining the field of star study and its influence therefore has been widespread. Compared to the institutional studies that were discussed earlier, Dyer's concepts of the star image and stars as signs locate the film star both more widely in society as a whole, and more narrowly through a detailed analysis of their appearance in media texts (including, but not restricted to, films). Although Dyer's own study is both more nuanced and more diffuse, the majority of the work it has inspired in star study has been predominantly focused on the concept of star images and their analysis rather than, for example, following up on his work in later chapters on methods for analysing star performances. Danae Clark has characterised the standard method that has emerged from Dyer's approach thus:

Choose a well-known star, establish his or her star image by analyzing his or her roles in various films or the "persona" established for the star through studio publicity departments, then explore the possible effects that this image might have on spectators.<sup>73</sup>

And her criticism that this widely followed method has lead to formulaic and repetitive work does appear justified.

Unlike production-centred studies, however, consumption-centred approaches do attempt to focus on individual stars and the meanings they generate in a way that would seem to offer an opportunity for

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<sup>72</sup> Dyer, R. (1979) *Stars* (London: British Film Institute).

<sup>73</sup> Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood*, ix-x.

acknowledging their role as a signifying phenomenon. The meanings that stars are found to convey are mostly seen to arise from extra-filmic discourses and the stars' previous film roles, however, rather than their specific appearances in individual films. Dyer describes how the star image "is manifest not only in films but in all kinds of media text".<sup>74</sup> This insistence on the significance of the film star's appearance in other media forms demonstrates a similar understanding of the star phenomenon to that of John Ellis who asserts that "the basic definition of a star is that of a performer in a particular medium whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation, and then feeds back into future performances".<sup>75</sup> This definition however can downplay the specific features of the phenomenon of the film star and produce instead a definition of stars as a general cultural phenomenon. Indeed this lack of specificity can be seen to have led to the recent impasse in cultural studies analyses of film stars in which the term star is argued to have become meaningless within film studies because "film stars no longer represent a standard notion of stardom as they once did".<sup>76</sup> From this perspective star studies is in danger of being subsumed within much broader studies of 'celebrity' as a social phenomenon.<sup>77</sup>

Within a consumption-focused approach the film star's meaning and significance are seen to emerge from their interpolation into the social constructions of their particular era, and the real interest of this kind of analysis lies in what audiences use stars for and whether they can be seen to be socially radical or conservative as a result. Thus Dyer argues, in direct contradiction to King, that audiences do have some control over the development of stars' images, suggesting that factors such as letters to fan magazines, box-office receipts and producer-commissioned audience research mean that "the audience's ideas about a star can act back on the media producers of the star's image".<sup>78</sup> Dyer further argues that the audience may control the meaning of those images:

Audiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and

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<sup>74</sup> Dyer, R. (1988) *Stars: New Edition* (London: British Film Institute), 34.

<sup>75</sup> Ellis, J. (1982) *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge), 91.

<sup>76</sup> Willis, A. (ed.) *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 1.

<sup>77</sup> See for example the recent publication S. Redmond and S. Holmes (eds.) (2007) *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (London: Sage Publications), which includes chapters on celebrity CEOs and star authors.

<sup>78</sup> Dyer, R. (1987) *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: British Film Institute and Macmillan), 5.



contradictions, that work for them.<sup>79</sup>

Dyer's investigation of audience interaction with stars serves a larger purpose though than merely delineating their meanings and effects. As he suggests, it becomes an exposure of the workings of capitalist ideology as a whole: "for our purposes much of the interest in Hollywood lies in this process of contradiction and its 'management' and those moments when hegemony is not, or is only uneasily, secured".<sup>80</sup> Dyer's approach to analysing film stars, therefore, can perhaps be most usefully described as employing a cultural studies approach, although both *Heavenly Bodies* and *Stars* drew their methods from many fields, including sociology and semiology.<sup>81</sup> His choice of stars to analyse is equally driven by this aim of ideological demystification. The examples of Jane Fonda in *Stars* and Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland and Paul Robeson in *Heavenly Bodies* were chosen as much for the ways in which they can be read as evidence of ideological contradictions within society as for their significance in film history and culture.<sup>82</sup> This lack of filmic specificity was not a weakness as far as Dyer was concerned; he went so far as to argue that "there are instances of stars whose films may actually be less important than other aspects of their career".<sup>83</sup> This emphasis on star images and their ideological effects, however, makes it difficult for this approach to reveal a great deal about film as a form and how film stars relate to that form specifically.

The weakness that Dyer did acknowledge in the star analyses being produced by himself and others was "our ignorance, theoretical and empirical, of how films work for, on, with audiences".<sup>84</sup> One theoretical understanding of how films worked on audiences, which Dyer chose not to utilize, was offered by psychoanalytical theories of subject positioning and indeed his avoidance of this approach

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>80</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, ibid., 3.

<sup>81</sup> "On the one hand the sociological concern can only make headway when informed by a proper engagement with the semiotics of stars....Equally, on the other hand, the semiotic concern has to be informed by the sociological." Ibid., 1.

<sup>82</sup> Perhaps solely for that reason in the case of Robeson.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 160.

was explicitly criticised in Simon Watney's review of his work.<sup>85</sup> Psychoanalytical approaches were seen at this time as offering a more theoretically rigid approach to studying stars as a phenomenon of consumption, offering as they did a confident, if schematic, understanding of how films work on spectators. This approach was enthusiastically taken up by a number of writers, especially after Laura Mulvey's influential article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which commented explicitly on the star phenomenon using a psychoanalytical approach, appeared in 1975.<sup>86</sup> Christine Gledhill described the split that emerged thereafter between theorists with different conceptions of the film viewer:

By the end of the seventies an impasse appeared to have arisen between a culturalist approach concerned with the social circulation of meanings and identities . . . and a psychoanalytical concern with the unconscious yet formative processes which underlie such meanings and identities.<sup>87</sup>

It is still possible to distinguish in work on stars between a culturalist approach such as Steve Cohan's study of male film stars of the 1950s, and a psychoanalytic one like Miriam Hansen's investigation of Rudolph Valentino.<sup>88</sup> This distinction is most evident in their conclusions, for while Cohan's intention is to examine how male film stars of the 1950s "contributed to but also resisted and problematized the postwar articulation of masculinity as a universal condition," Hansen suggests that Valentino beckons "the female spectator . . . beyond the devil of phallic identification into the deep blue sea of polymorphic perversity".<sup>89</sup>

The differences between these approaches are due to their very different conception of both the viewer and the star: The viewer is theorised as either a mass 'audience' or an individual 'spectator' and the star's functions are those of ideologically contradictory representations of social concerns and/or fantasy figures of identification and desire. As with Dyer's work, what both these approaches rely on,

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<sup>85</sup> "Dyer's reluctance to employ the vocabulary of psychoanalysis becomes something of a self-denying ordinance." Watney, S. (1987) 'Stellar Studies', *Screen*, 28/3, 111.

<sup>86</sup> Mulvey, L. (1975) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Screen*, 16/3, 6-18.

<sup>87</sup> Gledhill, C. (ed.) (1991) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge), xvi.

<sup>88</sup> Cohan, S. (1997) *Masked Men: Masculinity and Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), and M. Hansen (1991) 'Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship' in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge).

<sup>89</sup> Cohan, *Masked Men*, xv and Hansen, 'Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification', 274.

however, are the counter-textual possibilities of stars' images, which often leads to work which focuses on those stars which can be seen to embody social or psychic contradictions. This belief in much consumption-centred work that "stars frequently speak to dominant contradictions in social life", however, can lead to an artificially restricted choice of stars being studied and also to a selective choice of their film appearances, as it favours those stars and films which most readily render up those contradictions the writer seeks.<sup>90</sup> This suggests that for the proponents of these approaches their interest lies less in tracing the specific meanings and effects generated by specific stars in specific films and more in delineating and exposing generalised ideological or psychic processes in the viewer(s) and culture.

Another feature these readings share, whether proceeding from a culturalist or psychoanalytical perspective, is that they rely on mostly hypothetical assertions about the viewers' theorised responses.<sup>91</sup> For those analyses informed by cultural studies, the lack of empirical evidence to back up their claims about audience responses to stars is a real gap in their argument, as Dyer acknowledged, whereas for the psychoanalytically inclined this lack is less theoretically unsustainable but does lead to a certain sterility in their conclusions: for if viewing subjects always conform to the positioning offered by patriarchal, bourgeois cinema, spectators always end up in the same position whichever film or star they are watching. This approach also disavows a whole range of responses to film stars that do not fit with the dominant male-as-subject, woman-as-object paradigm. Even critics who subscribed to psychoanalytical theories eventually found this too limiting, and there was a "growing insistence upon the elaboration of a theory of female spectatorship".<sup>92</sup>

Through the use of such concepts as *fantasy* and *masquerade*, psychoanalytical approaches have been able to move away to some extent from the limiting nature of their original perspective. But this increased flexibility of subject formations still cannot answer the larger criticism that such readings are by their nature trans-historic and trans-social. As McDonald suggests, psychoanalytic concepts such

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<sup>90</sup> Butler, J.G. (ed.) (1991) *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 216. As Simon Watney comments, "concentration on the counter-textual possibilities . . . does make it difficult to deal with films where Hepburn consciously colludes with a conservative or downright reactionary scenario." 'Stellar Studies', 57.

<sup>91</sup> In this way Miriam Hansen refers to the "hypothetical spectator constructed through the film's strategies." 'Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification', 261.

<sup>92</sup> Doane, M.A. (1982) 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator', *Screen*, 23, 3-4, 87.

as desire, lack, voyeurism, fetishism and fantasy may offer an explanation of why we like stars in general, but they fail to account convincingly for the specific meanings generated by specific stars in specific films.<sup>93</sup> A more fundamental challenge to psychoanalytical theories comes from Murray Smith's suggestion that the theory of identification:

At once overestimates the power of films made in this formal mode to simply 'subject' spectators, and underestimates the potential of such films to engage spectators in a thought-provoking manner.<sup>94</sup>

This argument undermines many of the assumptions about the power and even the existence of the processes of identification which underlie psychoanalytical readings of film stars.

One solution to the lack of evidence of real audience responses for those who adopt a cultural studies approach has been offered by 'ethnographic' investigations, in which evidence of real viewers' actual responses to film stars is sought through the evidence of interviews, diaries and letters.<sup>95</sup> This kind of study has proved an increasingly popular way of studying stars, particularly for feminist critics, for as Jackie Stacey argues:

It is particularly important for feminists to challenge the absence of audiences from film studies, since it has reproduced an assumed passivity on the part of women in the cinema audience.<sup>96</sup>

This appeal to real viewers' experiences allows for a discussion of female spectators' pleasures which had previously been disavowed by psychoanalytical and apparatus theories. It builds on contemporary developments in cultural studies which contain an "accent on the specific pleasures of the audience . . . and a concentration on what the audience actually do [with a media text]".<sup>97</sup> Stacey explains how she

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<sup>93</sup> McDonald, P. (1995) "Star Studies" in J. Hollows and M. Jancovich (eds) *Approaches to Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 92.

<sup>94</sup> Smith, M. (1995) *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 5.

<sup>95</sup> "The term 'ethnographic' is being used here within the conventions of cultural studies approaches to audiences." J. Stacey (1994) *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge), 255.

<sup>96</sup> Stacey, J. (1991) 'Feminine Fascinations: Forms of Identification in Star-Audience Relations' in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge), 141.

<sup>97</sup> Turner, G. (2003) *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Routledge), 118-9.

adopted this method after noting the discrepancy between the “passion with which women spectators wrote about their Hollywood favourites, and feminist criticisms of the patriarchal constructions of femininity”.<sup>98</sup> But although this acknowledgment of the 'real' audience could be seen as an important step in acknowledging the spectator's role in generating a star's meanings, studies such as Stacey's and Steve Cohan's remain partial. Their methodologies mean that they can only focus on one historical moment of reception and they can therefore only come to limited conclusions about a star's meaning. In this way they inevitably reveal a lot more about the spectators' uses of and responses to that star. Stacey's own theorising of the process of spectatorship reveals how this approach is not necessarily interested in elucidating the star as a mainly cinematic phenomenon:

Spectatorship, when considered as an aspect of cultural consumption, should no longer be seen simply as an extension of a film text . . . nor as an isolated viewing process, but rather as part of a more general construction of identities.<sup>99</sup>

As with all these cultural studies approaches, therefore, it is in the consumption of the star that the meanings which form the object of study are to be found. The problem with this approach for the aims of this investigation is that although the star can be made to reveal insights into the process of consumption, the process of consumption is not used to reveal very much about the star.

Another weakness with a culturalist approach to the meanings of star images is exposed by John O. Thompson in 'Beyond Commutation' in which he focuses on the difference between the possible meanings of Bette Davis' star image in the 1940s and the present.<sup>100</sup> Thompson points out that “the idea of Bette Davis as career woman and proud of it is no doubt a true idea; but it is not 'present' in the same way as the Davis body's presence-to-the-camera is”.<sup>101</sup> He goes on to consider the implications of this insight:

As performances recede in time, not only are young viewers going to encounter them without

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<sup>98</sup> Stacey, 'Feminine Fascinations', 160-1.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>100</sup> Thompson, J.O. (1985) 'Beyond Commutation: A Reconsideration of Screen Acting', *Screen*, 26, 5, 64-76.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 70.

knowing biographical details about the performers, but certain categories of the being aimed at will require elucidation too.<sup>102</sup>

This insight has serious implications for cultural studies readings of stars which depend upon detailed research into, and hypothetical recreations of, the mind-set of the film star's original audience, as was Dyer's avowed intention in *Heavenly Bodies*.<sup>103</sup> It exposes how the meanings excavated in this manner are bound quite firmly to one historical moment of reception. One can go further and suggest that these meanings were probably only available to a limited section of the audience even at the time of the film's original release for, as Tino Balio has pointed out, "no single audience was ever exposed to all the promotional material created for a motion picture".<sup>104</sup> Yet many cultural studies conclusions about the meanings of film stars assume a high level of audience familiarity with stars' biographies and their publicity material. Cohan, for example, may have evidence that the contrast between Humphrey Bogart's elite social background and tough-guy persona, which is central to his reading of Bogart's image, was referred to in press releases of the time. It is harder to prove, however, that this information would have been read and remembered by members of the audience of Bogart's films.<sup>105</sup> Even appeals to 'real' viewers, whose responses are so often gathered and cited as evidence in such studies, may continue this bias in necessarily being made up of self-selecting fans and enthusiasts. Their experiences can provide very useful information, but may not represent the experience of the majority of the film-going audience at the time of the film's release.

### Identifying the Star-Shaped Hole

For all their differing perspectives and focus, both production- and consumption-centred approaches to film stars share a desire to answer large questions about how and why film stardom emerged and continued. The answers are variously ascribed to such suitably large phenomena as, capitalist

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>103</sup> "I have tried to reconstruct something of the meanings of Robeson and Monroe in the period in which they were themselves still making films." Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 3.

<sup>104</sup> Balio, T. (1995) *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930-1939* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press), 168.

<sup>105</sup> See the chapter, 'Tough Guys Make the Best Psychopaths' in Cohan, *Masked Men*, 79-121.

economics, capitalist ideology (and resistance to it), and psychic needs and desires in the viewer. As was discussed in the introduction, the posing of such grand questions and the subsequent positing of definitive answers to them is being treated with increased scepticism in film studies and recent approaches to film are less confident about working within such all-encompassing models. Nevertheless, they remain the dominant approaches within star study and much of the 'newness' of new work in star study arises from the types and forms of stars being investigated rather than in the methods being applied.<sup>106</sup> Danae Clark's suggestion that star study has been spinning its wheels seems justified by this increasingly desperate search for new figures to subject to the same standard formula of analysis.<sup>107</sup> Bruce Babington has also identified this trend and suggests that it gives rise to "the critique that critics, in their search for new subjects, misdefine minor performers as stars".<sup>108</sup> Perhaps most damagingly, this search for new stars has led to the term *star* being so widely applied in film studies that even the authors question how far their subjects fit within the field.<sup>109</sup> To correct for this widening and weakening of the concept of the film star, Chapter Three of this thesis begins with a delineation of more useful ways to identify and categorise film stars than are evident in much present work.

The over-liberal application of the term 'star' within film studies, however, is also responsible for diluting the concept of the film star to such an extent that the very existence of star study as a meaningful field of study within film studies becomes questionable: as Allen and Gomery warn, "the term 'star' as applied to rock stars, athletes and soap opera actors ... has become so overused as to become almost meaningless".<sup>110</sup> Christine Geraghty has usefully suggested that in the logic of this focus on the film star-as-celebrity:

It no longer makes sense to see this circulation of information and images as subsidiary or

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<sup>106</sup> *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* and *Stars: The Film Reader*, contain chapters on new kinds of film stars such as ethnic, world cinema and cult movie stars; as well as TV talk show hosts, real-life celebrities and music stars, for example.

<sup>107</sup> Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood*, ix.

<sup>108</sup> Babington, B. (2001) *British Stars and Stardom: From Alma Taylor to Sean Connery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 7.

<sup>109</sup> "The idea of a star has become somewhat blurred after decades of use." A. Willis (ed.) (2004) *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 1.

<sup>110</sup> Allen, R.C. and D. Gomery (1985) *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Random House), 172.

secondary to the films or indeed to see cinema as different from other entertainment arenas.<sup>111</sup>

A similar widening and weakening of focus is identifiable in production-centred approaches which, as we have seen, are now no longer solely interested in stars but are calling for the focus of such work to shift to other categories of Hollywood performers. Thus both production- and consumption-centred approaches appear to have exhausted their interest in the cinematic phenomenon of the film star and this may explain why what I refer to as the star-shaped hole at the centre of star studies has emerged. The direction in which these approaches are moving does not suggest they are likely to refocus on the film star in the future either.

As has been argued, the theoretical focus of these two approaches is not on the moment and process of the intervention of the individual star in specific films but on what that star can then be seen to reveal about the industrial/economic system that produces them or the ideological/psychic crises that they solve. It is in the pursuit of these areas of interest that the 'individual properties of the texts', in particular the star in the film, can become neglected because the meanings associated with the star figure and the processes by which they arise, are thus located outside the film in society and/or the psyche. Unfortunately, as we have seen, work produced from both these perspectives also often makes evidential shortcuts when commenting on how and what stars signify. Partly this is because these studies consider secondary discourses such as promotion material and/or audience responses to have equal weight for their analysis as evidence from the film appearances themselves, but it may also be that such textually inspired approaches are more suited to engaging with material which has already rendered the appeal of the star into words. In this way such approaches can sidestep the need for more detailed analysis of the appearance of the star in specific film sequences, whose significances and effects may be more challenging for the writer to analyse and render in scholarly language.

This reluctance to engage with the material of film should not be surprising therefore. Bill Nichols points out that these 'grand theories' "did not develop specifically from the attempt to come to grips with art, culture or aesthetics," and they therefore "are not well equipped to generate a comprehensive

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<sup>111</sup> Geraghty, C. (2000) 'Re-examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance' in C. Gledhill and L. Williams (eds) *Reinventing Film Studies* (London: Arnold), 189.



aesthetics”.<sup>112</sup> I would argue that it is this lack of aesthetic understanding which prevents these approaches from being able to engage with the questions which this thesis intends to investigate, questions about beauty, pleasure and emotion, as well as significance and response. Such an aesthetic understanding of film however, is what Geoffrey Nowell-Smith advocates when he argues that films are more than just texts to be read, which is often the assumption of ‘grand theory’-inspired approaches: “films also work in less discernible ways. They work as painting and music do; ...partly in ways that have linguistic equivalents and partly in ways that do not”.<sup>113</sup>

The recentring of the film star in star studies that this investigation intends to undertake is, therefore, both a methodological recentring of film details at the centre of such investigation and also the recentring of the specifically filmic features of the film-star phenomenon. This is why Christine Geraghty’s understanding of the star as a cinematic phenomenon is so important to this investigation. She argues that:

Polysemy and resistance thus became key terms in thinking about film stars, and the fan position, which is strongly associated with the star-as-celebrity, was assumed to be the ideal position from which to understand a star. For some kinds of stars and for some performances, however, this emphasis on the extra-textual is not necessary and it is the audiences’ understanding of the specifically cinematic pleasures of genre and performance which needs to be foregrounded.<sup>114</sup>

It is the contention of this thesis that Charlton Heston is this kind of star and it is just such a foregrounding of the ‘specifically cinematic pleasures’ associated with his film appearances therefore that this investigation is interested in developing. In order to achieve this, the methodological approaches developed in the next chapter will be ones which insist on the primacy of the evidence of the film in the analysis of the star enactment. Secondary evidence from publicity and promotion can and will be acknowledged, but the methods developed are ones that are capable of insisting on a hierarchy of evidence and in it the star’s film appearance will be given most weight. In order for

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<sup>112</sup> Nichols, B. (ed.) (1985) *Movies and Methods: Volume II* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 625.

<sup>113</sup> Nowell-Smith, G. (2000) ‘How Films Mean, or, from Aesthetics to Semiotics and Half-way Back Again’ in C. Gledhill and L. Williams (eds) *Re-inventing Film Studies* (London: Hodder Arnold), 16.

<sup>114</sup> *Re-examining Stardom*, *ibid.*, 195.

Chapter Two to develop a methodology capable of filling the star-shaped hole at the centre of star study therefore, it will be necessary to investigate and select approaches and methods that will allow for a more aesthetic understanding of both film form and the film star to be acknowledged in its analysis. In this way it should be possible to not only hang on to beauty and pleasure as Dyer wished to do, but to foreground and celebrate their role in the cinematic phenomenon of the film star.

## Two Filling the Star-Shaped Hole: The Star as a Cinematic Phenomenon

*Films mean because people want them to mean. It is the result of a process whereby people 'make sense' of something with which they are confronted. There is no possibility of the film meaning anything without the creative intervention of the spectator in determining what to pay attention to and what sense to give it. -*

*Geoffrey Nowell-Smith*

Chapter One's introductory account of star studies began with a comment on its as yet unfulfilled promise, and Jeremy Butler suggests that this might not just be a failure for one branch of film studies when he argues that, "the presence of stars is essential to . . . the cinema's visual pleasures and economic structures. If we cannot understand how they function, we cannot truly understand our experience of film".<sup>115</sup> The argument that the ability of star studies to be able to account fully for the significance of the film star would have implications beyond star study itself is supported by Paul McDonald, when he states that analysing stars will only become a worthwhile and necessary exercise if the signification of the star can be seen to influence the meaning of the film in some way.<sup>116</sup> Both these writers therefore accept that the significance of the star to the overall meaning and effect of a film is a question that should concern the whole of film studies and not just star studies. It may seem surprising therefore that an approach capable of doing this hasn't been fully elucidated, but to posit the star as the (or even a) site of meaning production is still a difficult project to justify. This is partly because linking any aspect of film form to meaning in this way is associated with aesthetic and 'formalist' approaches to film which have not been popular in film studies for some time. Such approaches are often accused of having an "apolitical fixation on art for art's sake and an ahistorical

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<sup>115</sup> Butler, J.G. (ed.) (1991) *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 15.

<sup>116</sup> McDonald, P. (2004) 'Why Study Film Acting? Some Opening Reflections' in C. Baron, D. Carson and F.P. Tomasulo (eds) *More than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 26.

focus on the text to the exclusion of other social and economic practices".<sup>117</sup> As we have seen, however, it is just such a focus on larger issues of society and economics that has led to star studies' neglect of the specificities of the star in the film and left many conclusions about star figures unsupported by detailed film evidence. Rather than fearing such an apolitical and ahistorical approach, therefore, this chapter will consider the benefits of such a close focus on the film and its form in an attempt to answer key questions about the process and effect of the film star's intervention in the film. If this also leads to a clearer understanding of certain aspects of the 'cinematic apparatus' and the way meaning is created in films, as Butler and McDonald suggest it may, then that can only enhance the understanding of all approaches to film.

In developing a methodology that is capable of exploring this thesis' more aesthetic interest in the star as a cinematic phenomenon, I have found Kristin Thompson's differentiation between the terms *approach* and *method* very helpful. She defines the difference in this way:

The approach thus helps the analyst to be consistent in studying more than one artwork. I will consider a *method* to be something more specific: a set of procedures employed in the actual analytical process.<sup>118</sup>

To fill the star-shaped hole requires both an aesthetic *approach*, which will allow for a focus on form; and descriptive and analytical *methods*, through which features of film sequences may be described and analysed effectively. This chapter therefore first considers existing aesthetic *approaches* to film, such as those offered by auteurist work and acting and performance studies, in order to adopt and adapt those features of their work that allow for a consistency in its own approach to a range of films. It then develops and explains the *methods* through which it is possible to isolate and analyse the star enactment with confidence and in detail. The methodology which emerges from this chapter is necessarily one more attuned to film as an art form than is usually found in star studies, in order to

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<sup>117</sup> Jenkins, H. (1995) 'Historical Poetics' in J. Hollows and M. Jancovich (eds) *Approaches to Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 100.

<sup>118</sup> Thompson, K. (1988) *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 3.

isolate the details of the star's aesthetic contribution to the film and to account for its significance and hence to understand the star as a cinematic phenomenon.

### **The Star as a Phenomenon of Form**

There are two kinds of analysis already practised in film studies that can be identified as offering a more nuanced and detailed approach to the star as a site of meaning production than the production- and consumption-focused approaches discussed in the previous chapter. Those approaches that consider the star as an aspect of a film's *mise-en-scène*, and those that investigate stars as actors, have both produced useful insights into the processes whereby the star figure can signify in a film. They have also developed analytical tools and a critical language through which a more detailed investigation of the star as a cinematic phenomenon may be possible. Although ultimately these approaches are not wholly adopted by this investigation, and it is mostly their weaknesses that are highlighted in this chapter, their work has proved valuable in moving the debate and focus in star studies away from consumption- and production-based studies and opening new areas for investigation.

It should not be surprising that some of the first writers to comment on the contribution stars make to the meaning and effects of specific films were those approaching film from an auteurist perspective, given their interest in *mise-en-scène* and their practice of close textual analysis. As John Caughie argues, their development of the concept of *mise-en-scène* is probably “the most important positive contribution of *auteurism* to the development of a precise and detailed film criticism, engaging with the specific mechanisms of visual discourse”.<sup>119</sup> This focus on *mise-en-scène* led to an acknowledgment in auteurist analysis of the powerful range of meanings generated by film stars, and also to the development of a vocabulary that could be used to discuss features of their performances. When discussing the work of Douglas Sirk, for example, Laura Mulvey comments on how “in the opening scene of *All that Heaven Allows*, Cary (Jane Wyman) first looks at Ron (Rock Hudson) with desire”.<sup>120</sup> In a similar way, Thomas Elsaesser highlights as significant the way James Dean kicks a portrait of his

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<sup>119</sup> Caughie, J. (ed.) (1981) *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 13.

<sup>120</sup> Mulvey, L. (1987) “Notes on Sirk and Melodrama” in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI Publishing), 77.

character's father as he storms out of his house in *Rebel Without a Cause*.<sup>121</sup> Thus the star's looks, gestures, and position within the frame are not only identified as important aspects of film form but their significance to the film's overall meaning and effect is also acknowledged. Perhaps even more importantly for the purposes of this thesis, however, "attention to mise-en-scène gives criticism a way of accounting for the text as pleasurable, pointing to its fascination as well as its meaning".<sup>122</sup> This important feature of the auteurist approach to cinema, in which cinematic pleasure is both accepted and valorised, has already been mentioned in reference to Mourlet's comments on Charlton Heston. It is a key feature of an aesthetic approach and will be strongly influential in an investigation aiming to account for cinematic pleasure in its analysis.

Although such a mise-en-scène-focused analysis can provide a technique and a vocabulary for describing some aspects of the contribution of the star within the film, it is not possible for the star enactment's role in the process of meaning production to be fully acknowledged by auteur critics. Any meanings and effects generated by the star presence are ultimately assigned to the intervention of the director and to their control of the pro-filmic elements of casting, blocking, lighting and camera-use. When Thomas Elsaesser suggests, for example, that in *Written on the Wind* "the desolation of the scene transfers itself onto the Bacall character" he finds the production of meaning, even in the case of a star's facial expression, to be generated elsewhere by the director.<sup>123</sup> From this perspective the star is treated as just another aspect of mise-en-scène which is available for the director's manipulation, and for this reason the star's most powerful artistic intervention is often seen to occur at the moment of their casting. This focus on the star's significance as an effect of casting rather than performance is evident in Colin McArthur's comments:

Godard surely has *Les Quatre Cents Coups* in mind when he cast Jean-Pierre Leaud as the unhappy Paul in *Masculin Féminin*, and Martin Ritt underlined the implicit criticism of the Bond cult in *The Spy who Came in From the Cold* by casting Bernard Lee, M in the Bond films, as a

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<sup>121</sup> Elsaesser, T. 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama' in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, 56.

<sup>122</sup> Caughie, *Theories of Authorship*, 8.

<sup>123</sup> Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', 53.

hapless grocer whom Lemass punches in the eye.<sup>124</sup>

The focus of auteur analyses of stars therefore is not so much on their *performance*, as on their *presence*, which can more easily be assigned to the director's agency. This is evident from the terminology that was developed alongside auteur theories to discuss the various features of mise-en-scène under the director's control, such as lighting and framing. Within this framework the film performer's contribution is categorised using the slightly dehumanising term *figure position and movement*, which reduces the star figure to being the bearer of effects they did not generate.

Two representative examples of the application of an auteurist approach can be found in Colin McArthur's 'The Real Presence' and Maurice Yacowar's 'An Aesthetic Defence of the Star System'.<sup>125</sup> Both these articles discuss star-generated meanings and effects and yet their conclusions reveal that their auteurist interest is more in how "a director can use an actor as just one more term of his rhetoric," and "how far casting has been used as a major artistic device".<sup>126</sup> A more recent example of this auteurist tendency can be seen in Virginia Wright Wexman's comments on how D. W. Griffith's casting of Lillian Gish is used to represent his world view:

Griffith elaborated a series of cinematic fantasies centred on the theme of romantic love in which Gish's fair-haired frailty represented an idealised image of woman's place within patriarchal marriage.<sup>127</sup>

Barry Keith Grant also demonstrates this privileging of the auteur director's world-view over the intervention of the star as the source of meaning production when he distinguishes between "Ford's Wayne" and "Hawks' Wayne" in his discussion of John Wayne's appearances in films by these two directors.<sup>128</sup> Thus although auteurist interest in the film star was one of the first acknowledgements of

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<sup>124</sup> McArthur, C. (1967) 'The Real Presence' in *Sight and Sound*, 36, 3, 143.

<sup>125</sup> McArthur, 141-143, and Yacowar, M. (1979) 'An Aesthetic Defence of the Star System in Films' *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Winter, 71.

<sup>126</sup> Yacowar, 'An Aesthetic Defence of the Star System', 45, and McArthur, 'The Real Presence', 142.

<sup>127</sup> Wexman, V. W. (1993) *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 40.

<sup>128</sup> Grant, B.K. (2001) 'John Ford and James Fenimore Cooper: Two Rode Together' in G. Studlar and M. Bernstein (eds) *John Ford Made Westerns* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 207.

the star as a signifying phenomenon, it tended to see the star as possessing one monolithic meaning and also suggested that the key intervention stars made in producing these significances occurs either at the point of casting or through their passive interpolation into the auteur director's overall control of *mise-en-scène*.

### **The Commutation Test and Film Performance**

John O. Thompson's application of the linguistic concept of the *commutation test* to film performances is perhaps one of the first theoretically robust attempts to analyse film acting in order to be able to identify how it creates meaning.<sup>129</sup> That this is his intention is evident in his assertion that "a good deal of the meaning of the fiction film is borne by its actors and their performances".<sup>130</sup> Thompson's approach to isolating this effect was developed through his linguistically inspired decision to consider "a film performance as a bundle of distinctive features".<sup>131</sup> He suggested that the way to bring out the significance of those features, and to isolate what is significant from what is not in performance, was through the hypothetical commutation (or substitution) of one star for another in the same role. This substitution could then be followed by a more objective consideration of what effect this change would have on the film's meanings as "in general whole-actor commutation is useful when it is not yet clear which feature(s) will turn out to be pertinently differential".<sup>132</sup>

Having established this as a theoretically robust method, however, Thompson's actual application of commutation (comparing the performances of Grace Kelly and Ava Gardner in *Mogambo* [John Ford, 1953]) takes the form of a comparison of two actresses' performances in the same film. This is materially different from hypothetically substituting one star for another, which has become the more generally understood method of the commutation test. The conclusions Thompson drew from his application of this test also expose the auteurist assumptions that his study was still working within:

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<sup>129</sup> Thompson, J. O. [1978] (1991) 'Screen Acting and the Commutation Test' in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge), 183-197.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.



But the contrast between the smiles of Ava Gardner and Grace Kelly in *Mogambo* is part of the system of that film. Imagining switching the smiles around . . . teaches us a good deal about the system of assumptions about types of women which Ford is working within here.<sup>133</sup>

Thompson's much more theoretically sophisticated approach to star performance can thus be seen to revert to an essentially auterist conclusion, suggesting as it does that it is at the moment of casting that meaning is generated and that commuting stars is mostly interesting for revealing the types they can be seen to represent and the generic expectations they produce. The fact that his application of this method leads to an analysis of the stars' different smiles, however, does show how this approach can work to isolate meaningful features of performance and encourage their investigation.

Despite Thompson's later judgement that "it has turned out to be unworkable-with", the commutation test has been used in a slightly modified form with some regularity in star studies.<sup>134</sup> Its method of isolating close details of performance through contrast and then excavating their possible meanings has been highly influential. The commutation test as proposed by Thompson, however, contained within it two levels of analysis which have led to very different applications and conclusions in its later uses. The first, and possibly most accessible way, that commutation testing has been applied in film studies is in investigating details of star image and persona. Substituting one star for another at the level of casting can be used to isolate the features of meaning and significance that a star brings to a role. Posing the question of what differences would emerge if Tom Cruise and not Keanu Reeves had been cast in the lead of *The Matrix* (1999, Andy and Larry Wachowski) for example, encourages one to be specific about the aspects of a star's persona and image that may influence the film's meanings.<sup>135</sup> Although quite far removed from Thompson's original intention, which was to allow the study of key details of performance, it is this version of commutation testing that has proved to be very workable with. A good example of this approach, and evidence of its widespread application, can be found in its

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>134</sup> Thompson, J.O. (1985) 'Beyond Commutation: A Reconsideration of Screen Acting', *Screen*, 26, 5, 64.

<sup>135</sup> It is hard to imagine one character's description of the hero in *The Matrix* as "cute but not too bright" having the same effect if Tom Cruise had been cast instead of Keanu Reeves, for example.

inclusion in Patrick Phillip's chapter 'Genre, Star and Auteur' in the widely used text book *An Introduction to Film Studies*.<sup>136</sup>

But this application of commutation still leaves the analysis at the level of casting and in the realms of the pro-filmic and hypothetical. Those interested in commenting effectively and in detail on film stars as generators of meanings and effect therefore, have used the commutation test in a second way. Whilst Thompson himself suggested the writer take an imaginative leap in order to commute performances (which is a difficult move to defend academically, as we have seen), he instead commuted two actual performances by different stars in the same film, thus allowing his arguments to be grounded in filmic examples.<sup>137</sup> This is the method that has been followed by those writers who have taken up the commutation test in order to isolate and analyse the key features of a film star's performance, but rather than *imagining* how a different star may have performed a part, they analyse film performances in a way that allows actual comparisons to be made by using film remakes for their comparative material.

Thus Roberta Pearson analyses James Mason's performance as Norman Maine in *A Star is Born* (George Cukor, 1954) through its differences to that of Frederic March's in the earlier version of the same film, produced in 1937. She explains how using a film remake allows for effective commutation thus:

Eleven scenes (defined rather loosely as exhibiting a certain unity of time and place) in the 1954 version that centre upon Norman Maine follow the original action quite closely, much of the dialogue from the original script re-appearing....The overlaps between the two films, coupled with the disjunctions between the two Norman Maines, provide an approach to that most vexed of all cinematic signifiers, performance.<sup>138</sup>

A more recent example of this method of commutation can be found in Paul McDonald's analysis of the performances of Janet Leigh as Marilyn Crane in the original *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and

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<sup>136</sup> Nelmes, J. (ed.) (1999) *An Introduction to Film Studies 2<sup>nd</sup> edn* (London: Routledge).

<sup>137</sup> Thompson in 'Screen Acting and the Commutation Test' described the process thus: "proposing the substitution in thought of one actor for another, in order to observe not merely *if* a difference in meaning results but *which* difference results.", 184.

<sup>138</sup> Pearson, R.E. (1999) 'A Star Performs: Mr. March, Mr. Mason and Mr. Maine' in A. Lovell and P. Kramer (eds) *Screen Acting* (London: Routledge), 62.

Anne Heche in the same role in Gus Van Sant's 1998 remake.<sup>139</sup> It would be hard to imagine a better case study for commutation testing than a film which claims to be a shot-for-shot remake of the original. Such a film offers almost scientifically controlled conditions for a discussion of performance in which all other possibly contaminating factors have been removed. As McDonald explains:

With remakes, differences are often produced by changes in mise-en-scène and editing, all of which influence and transform performances. Gus Van Sant's 1998 version of *Psycho* reduces this additional "noise".<sup>140</sup>

But its very uniqueness also highlights why this method of commutation testing cannot gain widespread application in star study, as these conditions for comparison will not exist for most of the film performances one would want to study. Not only do 'normal' remakes alter the original film to such an extent that accurate comparisons are compromised, but also, more importantly, one would not wish the focus of star study to be solely determined by whether a star's films have been remade or not, as this would severely limit which star's performances could be analysed at all.

Whilst I agree wholeheartedly with McDonald's argument that "analysing film acting will only become a worthwhile and necessary exercise if the signification of the actor can be seen to influence the meaning of the film in some way," it is also clear that using film remakes in this way cannot provide a general model for such analysis.<sup>141</sup> If one is willing to benefit from the insights into performance and how it generates meanings and effects that these examples have produced, however, a way of accounting for the significance of the star without recourse to the influence of the industry or the auteur as their ultimate point of origin may be possible. In an attempt to develop such a method Chapter Five of this thesis demonstrates how categories of genre, period, and production method can offer enough comparability to allow for a more widespread application of commutation as a methodology in star study. As will be demonstrated, selecting films produced in the same period and under similar production method allows for a high level of comparability and the advantage of genre means the films

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<sup>139</sup> McDonald, P. (2004) "Why Study Film Acting?: Some Opening Reflections" in C. Baron, D. Carson and F.P. Tomasulo (eds) *More than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance* (Detroit: Wayne State University) 23-41.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 26.

not only share similar plots, film styles and characterisations but even stock scenes which allow for the comparison to be even closer.

## Acting

Despite using *acting* and *performance* somewhat interchangeably in the body of their texts, it is significant that Thompson and McDonald choose to use the term *acting* in their titles to categorise the aspect of film form that they are interested in isolating through commutation. The study of film acting has offered the most widely adopted alternative to consumption- and production-centred approaches and generated a great deal of the new work being produced on film stars.<sup>142</sup> Two separate impulses can be seen to lie behind these investigations. On a purely formal level, writers have been interested to acknowledge and analyse the way film acting can contribute to a film's overall meaning and significance, arguing that screen performers are "an integral component of film, contributing to audiences' interpretations just as framing, editing, lighting, production, and sound design do".<sup>143</sup> But a further reason for isolating film acting as a discrete subject for scrutiny arises from a desire to defend film performers from previously widespread claims that there is little skill necessary for film acting, especially from those appearing in starring roles. Suggestions such as Barry King's, that "the formative capacities of film . . . can be used to compensate for a low level of technical ability as an actor", represent a commonly expressed view in star studies.<sup>144</sup> As a reaction against this attitude, James Naremore makes it clear in his introduction to *Acting in the Cinema* that "one of my purposes is to stress the important artistic contributions players usually make to films."<sup>145</sup>

Two different agendas are thus discernible in work on film acting from studies solely interested in how best to describe and analyse the significance of acting as an aspect of film form, and those which are also interested in explicitly linking the creation of such meanings to the agency and control of the film

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<sup>142</sup> See for example: J. Naremore (1988) *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press); M. Keane (1993) 'Dyer Straits: Theoretical Issues in Studies of Film Acting', *Post-script*, 12, 2, 33; A. Lovell and P. Kramer (eds) (1999) *Screen Acting* (London: Routledge); K. Hollinger (2006) *The Actress: Hollywood Acting and the Female Star* (London: Routledge); P. Robertson Wojcik (ed) (2004) *Movie Acting: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge).

<sup>143</sup> Baron, C. and S.M. Carnicke (2008) *Reframing Screen Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 1.

<sup>144</sup> King, B. (1991) 'Articulating Stardom' in J.G. Butler (ed.) *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 133.

<sup>145</sup> Naremore, J. (1988) *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 4.

actor and thus disputing claims that “the routinised practices in the mainstream cinema tend to shift the frontier of control away from the actor”.<sup>146</sup> One way to assert this agency is through a focus on the skill and craft of the film actor and for this reason Lovell and Kramer, for example, suggest that “the considerable skills and abilities of a wide range of actresses . . . go ignored” within much of film studies.<sup>147</sup> These different agendas mean that although this work shares a focus on screen acting, it adopts different methods and comes to different conclusions about how best to investigate it.

Although the designation 'figure expression and movement' lent some clarity to those mise-en-scène analyses that featured analysis of star performances, one of the first tasks for those investigating film acting in more detail was to be specific about the features of which it consists. This aim gains added importance when a common complaint about the difficulty of detailed analysis of film acting is that it is “analogical, a mode of communication that works in terms of proportion, gradation and inflection, rather than the clear-cut distinctions and differences of digital systems”.<sup>148</sup> Despite this suggestion however, the categories used by James Naremore and Andrew Higson in their analyses can be seen to reflect an understanding within film studies of the features of acting that can be quite effectively defined and differentiated. Naremore explicitly rejects creating too rigid an analytical schema, stating that he prefers to allow his “distinctions to emerge in more general ways from a series of four rather discursive chapters”.<sup>149</sup> Those distinctions that do emerge within his work however - facial expression, gesture, posture, movement, and voice - reflect closely those cited by Higson: “The facial, the gestural, the corporeal (or postural) and the vocal”.<sup>150</sup> That these categories also closely reflect those suggested by Dyer in his definition of performance signs, suggests that far from being complex or indefinable there is an easily arrived at consensus amongst those who study film acting of the features it consists of and

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<sup>146</sup> King, 'Articulating Stardom', 133.

<sup>147</sup> Lovell, A. and Kramer, P. (eds) (1999) *Screen Acting* (London: Routledge), 3.

<sup>148</sup> Maltby, R. (2003) *Hollywood Cinema 2<sup>nd</sup> edn* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 390.

<sup>149</sup> Naremore, J. (1988) *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 4.

<sup>150</sup> Higson, A. (2004) 'Film Acting and Independent Cinema' in P. Robertson Wojcik, (ed.) *Movie Acting: A Film Reader* (London: Routledge), 147.

through which it can be analysed.<sup>151</sup>

Despite the frequent use of and reference to these analytical categories in much writing on acting, many writers continue to be persuaded of the difficulty of describing acting features effectively. Wojcik, for example, claims that "film acting can seem transparent and resistant to description or analysis....it can be very difficult to describe acting".<sup>152</sup> This suggests that it may not be a lack of discernible distinctions within film acting which has hindered detailed analysis, but a fear of the descriptive language necessary when analysing the features discernible within those distinctions. As Carole Zucker suggests:

When discussing the actor, we enter the awesome and perilous territory of the human presence. Interest circulates around the expressive qualities of an actor's voice and body; the project of describing and articulating an aural characteristic or a gestural trait can be daunting.<sup>153</sup>

It may well be that it is this trepidation that has led to the search for more apparently objective schemas through which to describe film acting, rather than relying on commonly used descriptive language such as that suggested by Naremore and Higson. Terms from other disciplines such as body language, kinesics and dance notation have all been proposed as offering more scientific frameworks through which to describe and analyse features of film acting.

In this way kinesics, for example, was used by Virginia Wright Wexman in her study of Humphrey Bogart's performances and was later applied to Judy Garland's film appearances by Adrienne L. McLean.<sup>154</sup> With similar aims Baron and Carnicke have recently proposed adopting a system of

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<sup>151</sup> "The signs of performance are: facial expression; voice; gestures (principally of hands and arms, but also of any limb, e.g. neck, leg); body posture (how someone is standing or sitting); body movement (movement of the whole body, including how someone stands up or sits down, how they walk, run etc.)." Dyer, *Stars*, 134.

<sup>152</sup> Robertson Wojcik, P. (2004) *Movie Acting: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge), 1.

<sup>153</sup> Zucker, C. (1990) *Making Visible the Invisible: An Anthology of Original Essays on Film Acting* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press), viii.

<sup>154</sup> See Wexman, V.W. (1991) 'Kinesics and Film Acting; Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*' in J.G. Butler (ed.) (1991) *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 205; and A. McLean (2002) 'Feeling and the Filmed Body: Judy Garland and the Kinesics of Suffering', *Film Quarterly*, 55, 3, 3-15.

notation from Laban Movement Analysis in order to describe and analyse screen performances.<sup>155</sup>

These methods can produce quite detailed descriptions of the star's physical movements; Garland is described as a 'sagittal mover' for example, "someone whose movements and gestures tend to take place in or be directed through the 'wheel plane' that bisects the body vertically from front to back", and Baron and Carnicke contrast the linear movements of Denzel Washington with the more circular movement of Ethan Hawke in their analysis of a scene from *Training Day* (Antoine Fuqua, 2001).<sup>156</sup> It soon becomes clear however that the use of technical terminology from other fields (whether it be choreography notation or, as in the case of Maclean's analysis, effort-shape analysis) in a search for analytical clarity can be undermined by the lack of a shared language between writer and reader. This means that quite specific terminology nevertheless has to be 'translated' back into layman's terms, thus losing some of the benefits of analytical sharpness. In Baron and Carnicke's preferred Laban-based framework for example, there are eight basic 'efforts' which can be categorised in four different 'strengths'. John O. Thompson's admission that "too 'micro' an analysis can destroy the object we are concerned with" is a helpful antidote to the idea that finer and finer analytical terms will necessarily allow the writer to accurately define and quantify the meaning and effect of star performances.<sup>157</sup>

Martin Shingler's description and analysis of Bette Davis' performance in *The Letter* (William Wyler, 1940) using an understanding of Martha Graham's dance techniques could be seen as another application of this kind of approach, but it is differentiated through Shingler's appeal to evidence of Davis' own training in this technique to defend the relevance of its application in his analysis.<sup>158</sup> The previous analytical schemas we have discussed were chosen solely on the grounds of their perceived descriptive usefulness, indeed Baron and Carnicke are quite explicit that "drawing on craft vocabulary to describe acting in individual films need not involve any claim about the techniques the actors themselves might have used".<sup>159</sup> Shingler however does justify his use of dance and movement

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<sup>155</sup> 'Laban: Spatial and Temporal Dimensions of Movement' in C. Baron and S.M. Carnicke (2008) *Reframing Screen Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 118-207.

<sup>156</sup> Maclean, 'Feeling and the Filmed Body', 7-8 and Baron and Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance*, 193.

<sup>157</sup> Thompson, 'Screen Acting and the Commutation Test', 190.

<sup>158</sup> Shingler, M. (1999) 'Bette Davis: Malevolence in Motion' in A. Lovell and P. Kramer (eds) *Screen Acting* (London: Routledge), 46-57.

<sup>159</sup> Baron and Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance*, 2.

terminology through appealing to evidence of the performer's own knowledge of and training in the technique: "this is the product of an actress trained in the art of expressive movement and, more specifically, in the Graham technique".<sup>160</sup> In this justification Shingler is followed by other writers who choose to focus on the training and techniques actors are known to have studied under or used to then describe and analyse the performances they produce.

A move away from what could be described as a more integrated film analysis such as that employed by auterist analysis, is encouraged by this focus on actors' and directors' training and preparation methods. These studies of screen acting tend to consider the film actor's performance style quite separately from other aspects of mise-en-scène in order to assert screen acting as a viable subject for study in its own right and to argue for the actor's agency and control over the meanings thus created. The kinds of approach it favours are evident in Lovell and Kramer's introduction to their volume of essays on film acting, in which they suggest that "much contemporary film theory and criticism is too abstract".<sup>161</sup> As a corrective to such 'abstract' theorising, the supporting material in their volume is representative of the new types of evidence that this approach to film acting appeals to: acting manuals; interviews with, and writing by, drama coaches and film performers; and details of theatre training and practice techniques.

This approach to studying film acting, therefore, moves beyond analysis of the visible detail in the frame by also including as evidence first-hand accounts of the processes of film acting, including what film actors reveal about their preparations before filming starts (such as rehearsals and other character development practices) as well as what happens during shooting. Such evidence is necessary for their arguments for, as Bruce Kawin points out:

Without doing the research, there is no automatic way to know whether a certain brilliant gesture was thought up by the writer, called for by the director, caught by the cameraman, or discovered by the actor.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Shingler, 'Bette Davis', 50.

<sup>161</sup> Lovell and Kramer, *Screen Acting*, 8.

<sup>162</sup> Kawin, B.F. (1992) *How Movies Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 374.



It could be argued that evidence for the agency behind specific performance features in film sequences can be found in first-person accounts of film production, which we have seen some writers attempting to excavate through research into first-hand accounts of film performers' experiences. Charlton Heston's description of his experience of shooting a scene in *Ben Hur* (William Wyler, 1959) could be used in this way as evidence for his conscious contribution to the film's form and meanings:

The shot was, I was supposed to walk from the door across about maybe sixty feet and down two or three shallow steps and out of camera. And we did ... I think it may have been as many as eight takes, that wasn't a lot for Willy... And finally I said to Willy, "You know, you've got to help me here Willy, I don't know what you want." He said, "You're fine, it's just in that first take, where the dolly grip missed the mark and on that take as you stepped down to the second step, the toe of your sandal hit that broken pot there and it was the only sound in the whole shot and I thought that might happen again." And I said, "Willy, I put that pot there, I thought it might be an interesting touch in the scene as there was no other sound, and then when you didn't print it I thought you didn't want it, so I didn't do it again. But believe me, if you want my toe to touch that pot it will do it, that's what I do for a living."<sup>163</sup>

This would seem to offer concrete evidence, for those searching for it, of the actor's specific contribution to characterisation through gesture and interaction with props. But this anecdote also undermines such an approach through acknowledging the intensely collaborative and fragmentary nature of the processes that produce such filmic moments. These include the numerous takes, the process of sound design and recording, and the dressing of the set. More importantly, we cannot rely on similar evidence being available for the majority of star performances. Nor can we always necessarily rely on the veracity of such accounts - the punchline to Heston's anecdote, "that's what I do for a living," hints at the professional resentments that can colour such 'evidence'.

It was in search of just such primary evidence, however, that Carole Zucker in *Figures of Light* interviewed actors and their trainers, her stated aim being to "determine the way in which actors' training...affects the performance we witness on screen".<sup>164</sup> One of the weaknesses of this approach becomes evident, however, when stars' comments are given as much weight as details from the films

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<sup>163</sup> *Ben Hur* (William Wyler, 1959) DVD Commentary Track by Charlton Heston.

<sup>164</sup> Zucker, C. (1993) 'Introduction: Film Acting', *Postscript*, 12, 2, 3.

themselves as evidence for performance styles. In Zucker's entire interview with Richard Dreyfuss, for example, there is only one question and answer concerned with a specific film moment.<sup>165</sup> But beyond this lack of film analysis it is also worth considering, as Karen Hollinger warns, how interviews are also "notoriously unreliable sources for the methods used by screen actors," as "when actors talk about acting, they often do so in ways that are anecdotal, elliptical, mystifying and indirect".<sup>166</sup> These weaknesses were identified by one reviewer of Zucker's *Figures of Light* who felt that the use of interviews can produce a fragmented effect because the personalities expressing themselves are so diverse and the responses tend to move in many different directions.<sup>167</sup> But a more fundamental problem with Zucker's approach is that it fails to heed John Caughie's perceptive warning that:

It is important to distinguish between two ways of thinking about acting, which we might loosely summarise as the difference between the *intentions* of specific traditions of acting, and the *effects* of acting in terms of the production of meaning.<sup>168</sup>

The drive to make this distinction between intentions and effects may explain the opposite impulse in the edited collection *More than a Method* which, in its introduction, claims that its "consistent emphasis on *performance as presented on screen* challenges the idea that reference to training or working method is the best or only way to categorize performances".<sup>169</sup> Unfortunately the result of this emphasis in many of the chapters is a return to auteurist conclusions about the agency for performance details. In this way the meanings and effects of the film's performances are regularly traced back to the moment of casting: "there is a curious bond that links the aesthetic choices of film makers like Bresson and Woo . . . a casting process that goes beyond the more familiar strategies of typecasting and tpage".<sup>170</sup> Even when performance details are discussed, their agency is most often placed with the director. So many of the essays in the collection are concerned with identifying the

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<sup>165</sup> Zucker, C. (ed.) (1995) *Figures of Light: Actors and Directors Illuminate the Art of Film Acting* (New York: Plenum), 67-82.

<sup>166</sup> Hollinger, K. (2006) *The Actress: Hollywood Acting and the Female Star* (London: Routledge), 4.

<sup>167</sup> Prince, S. (1996) 'Review of *Figures of Light*', *Film Quarterly*, 50, 1, 49.

<sup>168</sup> Quoted by Higson in (1986) 'Film Acting and Independent Cinema', 145.

<sup>169</sup> Baron, C., D. Carson and F.P. Tomasulo (eds) (2004) *More than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance* (Detroit: Wayne State University), 2.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

performance styles in the films of auteur directors in fact, that one reviewer asked "is further discussion of film performance best served by a book that often pays more attention to directors than actors?"<sup>171</sup>

This overview of work on film acting suggests that investigations into the meaning and effects created by performance in film are often diverted by a debate over agency. But, as Philip Drake points out, "the presence of the performer is mediated in such a way as to make discussion of actual intention and authorship very difficult," and for this reason the methodology developed in this chapter and applied in the rest of the thesis will not depend on assigning agency for its analysis to be defensible.<sup>172</sup> One way of mitigating such crudely intention-based arguments is suggested by work which seeks to place performance styles more broadly in their historical and cultural contexts, rather than regarding them simply as individual choices. Roberta E. Pearson for example, in her study of the changes in film performance styles between 1909 and 1912, shows how that transformation was "the result of a complexly overdetermined interaction among text, intertext and context".<sup>173</sup> Importantly, Pearson's argument relies on evidence from the films themselves as well as trade press discourse and accounts of contemporary theatrical performance styles. Interestingly, such historical studies often choose to investigate periods whose performers and performance styles are perceived to be neglected or misjudged by later writers. This impulse lies behind both Pearson's desire to revise crude judgements of performance styles in silent cinema as either 'histrionic' or 'verisimilar', and also Cynthia Baron's investigation into performance styles in the studio era. Baron's investigation into the methods for creating screen performances used in Hollywood in the '30s and '40s aims to rescue such performances from the perception that they are somehow deficient, especially when compared to the Strasberg method-inspired performances of the 1950s.<sup>174</sup> In order to overturn these perceptions, Baron investigates the historical details of the training and preparation techniques used by film actors and their studios in the 1930s and '40s. She is thus able to argue that these techniques did not necessarily create conventional, unimaginative and inauthentic performances, as proponents of method acting

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<sup>171</sup> Esch, K. (2005) 'Review of *More than a Method*', *Film Quarterly*, 59, 1, 63.

<sup>172</sup> Drake, P. (2006) 'Reconceptualising Screen Performance', *Journal of Film and Video*, 58, 1-2, 87.

<sup>173</sup> Pearson, R.E. (1992) *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 104.

<sup>174</sup> Baron C. (1991) 'Crafting Film Performances: Acting in the Hollywood Studio Era' in Lovell and Kramer, *Screen Acting*, 31-45.

argued, and how they conversely included as much preparation, effort and skill as other techniques. Rather than being distracted by a desire to locate the agency for these performance styles solely with the film actors or their directors, however, both these works use evidence of training and techniques as only one other context through which performance style can be investigated and locate a variety of agents behind the performance styles identifiable in the films they are investigating.

Although not as academically well developed as such historical investigations, the generic context also needs to be considered when investigating performance codes, as genre further complicates any simplistic location of agency for performance styles with individual actors or directors. Richard deCordova highlighted how “the examination of the ways that different genres circumscribe the form and position of performance in film is an important and underdeveloped area of genre studies”, and his contention that “although performance has been central to the definition of a couple of genres, it has had a fairly marginal place in most genre studies” may still be true.<sup>175</sup> Similarly, genre awareness has only a marginal place in most performance studies and deCordova’s argument that performance is rendered due to genre-specific rules has yet to be fully engaged with in studies of film performance.<sup>176</sup> An awareness of both the historic and the generic conventions that a star performance is produced within however, could prevent simplistic assumptions about the unmediated agency of either the star performer or the director being straightforwardly responsible for the meanings and effects created by such performances, and these contextual parameters will certainly be applied in the analysis of Heston’s enactments in later chapters.

### **Stars Acting / Stars Performing**

Although tracing their point of origin to star studies, studies of film acting, rather like production-based investigations of film actors, have no methodological necessity to focus solely on stars, and to some extent they are developing through a rejection of such a focus. Just as Danae Clark wishes to replace

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<sup>175</sup> DeCordova, R. (1995) ‘Genre and Performance: An Overview’ in B.K. Grant *Film Genre Reader II* (ed.) (Austin: University of Texas Press), although such an awareness is discernible in work on individual genres such as melodrama, musicals and comedies, 133.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

studies of stars with studies of the 'actor as worker', so Baron and Carnicke argue that "star images belong to the list of categories that must be distinguished from performance elements before productive analysis of screen performance can occur".<sup>177</sup> The use of the term 'actor' and 'acting' can thus lead to the exclusion of the concept of star from these investigations into film performance and, ironically, a methodological impulse to defend and valorise the star by emphasising their skill and artistry has for some reached the conclusion that the star, as star, has little bearing on such investigations. One reason for reaching this position is that in creating a single definition and analytical schema for all screen acting one implies that the same analytical methods can be applied to all screen actors regardless of their status. There is an understanding in star study however that, on the contrary, the differences between star performances and those of other figures on screen are not distinguishable merely in terms of gradation. Such differences are rather due to those performances belonging to different ontological categories which therefore require different methods of analysis. And it may be an awareness of this ontological distinction, rather than a crude denial of their individual skill, that has led to past claims by writers that film stars do not act.

When John Ellis attempted to account analytically for the differences between the performances of film stars and those of other film performers, he suggested that:

Having the audience's attention, (and the camera's, and the fiction's), anything that the star does becomes significant. Hence the star is permitted to underact, compared to the supporting cast.<sup>178</sup>

This distinction was seen in very similar terms by Barry King when he asked: "let us see how far we can unpack the mysteries of stardom by looking at it in relation to film acting".<sup>179</sup> The distinction he identified was that "to say that a star behaves does not mean that they are themselves, but rather stars do not, as it were, surrender their public personality to the demands of characterization".<sup>180</sup> This

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<sup>177</sup> Baron and Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance*, 65.

<sup>178</sup> Ellis, J. (1992) *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge), 104.

<sup>179</sup> King, B. 'Stardom as Occupation', 157.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

regularly discerned distinction between the performance style of the star and that of other screen performers is also recognised by James Naremore when he suggests that “as a general rule, Hollywood has required that supporting players, ethnic minorities, and women be more animated or broadly expressive than white male leads”.<sup>181</sup> These writers are not claiming that stars cannot or do not act, per se, but they are rather acknowledging the very different register of the star's performance compared to that of other performers on screen. Rather than suggesting stars always underact however, John Ellis recognised two performance options available to the star: “one is that of drastically underperforming in comparison to the ‘unknown’ section of the cast; and the other is to overperform in order to emphasise the work of acting”.<sup>182</sup> This latter performance option has been further commented on by Phillip Drake who, in contrast to earlier analyses, focuses on examples where it is the star who produces the more visible performance and the supporting actor who is more 'realistic'.<sup>183</sup> In order to distinguish between these different economies of acting, Drake focuses on the opening sequence of *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) in which he suggests Marlon Brando's performance uses codes of naturalism, whilst the supporting actor's performance is in a contrastingly realistic mode.<sup>184</sup> Drake argues, however, that Brando's naturalistic performance “has the paradoxical effect of foregrounding the surface of the performance and the visibility of the star”, whereas the supporting actor's performance remains committed to narrative and is therefore less visible, being more informed by a discourse of character.<sup>185</sup>

This different characterisation of the distinction between the star performance and that of the supporting player in Drake's analysis from that offered by Naremore and King, however, is due more to changes in star performance style over time than to a major difference in perception of the distinction between the star and other performers. The stars Drake uses for his examples, such as Robert De Niro and Marlon Brando, are associated with method acting, unlike the classical Hollywood stars who were the focus of the earlier analyses. These more modern stars can be seen to fit Christine Geraghty's

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<sup>181</sup> Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 43.

<sup>182</sup> Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, 104.

<sup>183</sup> Drake, P. (2006) ‘Reconceptualising Screen Performance’, *Journal of Film and Video*, 58, 1-2, 84-92.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

category of 'star-as-performer' which she suggests is a relatively recent phenomenon.<sup>186</sup> Geraghty uses this term to describe stars associated with method acting, suggesting that "there has been quite a pronounced shift towards performance as a mark of stardom and the concept of star-as-performer has become a way of re-establishing film-star status".<sup>187</sup> This suggests that the way the star performance is marked out as different in mode from those of surrounding performances in a film is as determined by cultural and historical shifts as other aspects of performance, and that the nature of this distinction can and has changed over time in a way that reflects changes in cultural concepts of film stardom. As Drake points out, "star performances must always be recognisable as the products of stars, of individuals whose signifying function exceeds the diegesis," and for this reason the distinction between star and other performers is always maintained, even if the form that difference takes changes.<sup>188</sup> As we can see from these debates about the distinctiveness of the star performer, "the question of stardom problematises the discussion of performance" in ways that investigations which avoid the issue of star status, and use the term *acting* or even *performance*, may fail to allow for.<sup>189</sup>

### **Why *Performance* not *Acting*?**

To acknowledge a more nuanced distinction in analyses of star performances it is necessary to adopt Drake's understanding of the term *performance* and distinguish it rigorously from *acting*, rather than using the two terms interchangeably as many analyses do. Drake's decision to treat "'acting' as a subset of 'performance', as describing a dramatic mode of performance that highlights the presence of character" seems a necessary step if methodological clarity is to be brought to this area.<sup>190</sup> This understanding of the difference between the features that the two terms refer to also highlights one other weakness which using approaches and concepts based on analyses of acting can lead to; namely, the limited range of performances and genres which it can usefully illuminate. Naremore's stated bias in his selection of films and performances to analyse, in which he avoids "performers of

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<sup>186</sup> Geraghty, C. (2000) 'Re-examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance' in C. Gledhill, and L. Williams (eds) *Reinventing Film Studies* (London: Arnold), 192.

<sup>187</sup> *Re-examining Stardom*, *ibid.*, 192.

<sup>188</sup> Drake, 'Reconceptualising Film Performance', 93.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

musical comedy, staying mainly within the confines of realistic drama," is also evident in many works on screen acting which are not so explicit about this limitation in their approach.<sup>191</sup> This bias towards selecting films from within the genre of realistic drama when investigating acting is to be expected however, as they are the films most likely to contain performances focused on highlighting character and therefore to contain performances consisting mostly of 'acting'.

For a full consideration of film performance, however, investigations need to acknowledge all the modes of film performance, as Drake argues "it is, therefore, important for film analysis to look at a broad spectrum of modes of performance, not just at acting".<sup>192</sup> Genres that contain regular displays of other modes of performance; such as fights, physical action, stunts, slapstick, and singing and dancing for example, call for a broader understanding of performance than a narrow focus on 'acting' allows for. One of the key weaknesses of approaches that focus on acting, therefore, is that they are only suited to investigating one mode of performance and as a result, fail to illuminate fully the performances of stars who regularly appear in films that call on these other modes of performance. This is especially true of Charlton Heston, who often appeared in genres, such as epics, westerns and science-fiction, in which the performance of physical action sequences are central to the films' narratives and characterisations. The other weakness with focusing on acting, as we have seen, is that in such work the specificity of the star performance as a separate category tends to become occluded, ignoring the fact that, as Drake points out, "all star performances must to an extent . . . be already encoded ostensive signs" and that they therefore need analysing with approaches that are able to recognise and include that specificity in the terms of their investigation.<sup>193</sup>

Whilst this chapter has repeatedly called for a focus on the star as signifying phenomenon, it is equally concerned with examining the star as a cinematic phenomenon, by which term I mean to imply, as Christine Geraghty suggested, a phenomenon whose most interesting and pertinent features are evident in the detail of films. This term also differentiates the understanding of the star which this work focuses on from those approaches which concern themselves with consumption and production, adopting instead one that is based on the individual properties of individual films. This aim cannot be

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<sup>191</sup> Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 5.

<sup>192</sup> Drake, "Reconceptualising Film Performance", 93.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.



elucidated through approaches that seek to downplay or elide the differences between film and theatre, therefore, as many studies of acting and performance seek to do. Baron and Carnicke, for example, suggest that:

Some might argue that vocabulary developed in theater and performance studies cannot be used in film analysis because cinema and theater are entirely different art forms, cultural products, and economic industries with separate histories and audiences. They are not.<sup>194</sup>

An aesthetic approach to investigating star enactments will inevitably be more interested in the aesthetic specificities of film rather than its similarities to other art forms. Rather than developing or applying the complex taxonomies that have been suggested for furthering analyses of screen acting/performance, therefore, it is important for the aims of this thesis to develop a mode of writing with which to describe film performance which is accessible, accurate and descriptive, but also specifically developed for discussing and describing film as a discrete form. Theatre-inspired approaches cannot offer this for, as Stern and Kouvaros argue:

In trying to understand the way that performative modes may elicit sensory responses from viewers (not just visual, but also auditory, tactile) it is not enough to delineate dramaturgical codes and actorly conventions.<sup>195</sup>

Moving away from theatrically inspired analyses with their focus on acting, also means that star performers with low cultural status such as Charlton Heston, whose performances are usually described in terms of their lack and failure, may be more effectively contextualised and fairly reappraised, for as Drake suggests, “the study of screen performance casts interesting light on debates over cultural value that are often naturalized in critical writing, which overwhelmingly favors teleological modes of performance”.<sup>196</sup> It would appear, therefore, that an approach that takes its inspiration from a theatrical understanding of acting will not be helpful in establishing Charlton Heston (and many other major film stars) as worthy subjects for study.

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<sup>194</sup> Baron, and Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance*, 2.

<sup>195</sup> Stern, L. and G. Kouvaros (eds) (1999) *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* (Sydney: Power Publications). 12.

<sup>196</sup> Drake, ‘Reconceptualising Film Performance’, 93.

Whilst acknowledging that performance is a complex area to investigate, it is clear that elucidating star performances in greater detail will not necessarily be furthered by developing complex taxonomies that are capable of describing all screen acting/performances. Rather, such an investigation would benefit from Pearson's insight that, reducing the ambiguity of performance signs "requires applying extra- and intertextual knowledge, as well as some notion of reception, to contextualise textual analysis".<sup>197</sup> From this chapter's overview it is apparent that, just as production- and consumption-centred approaches to stars can downplay or lack detailed film analysis, thus creating a star-shaped hole in their investigations, acting- and performance-centred approaches can conversely underplay the importance of contextual factors in the meanings and effects generated by star performances and efface the film star's accrued significances from their analyses altogether. A focus on the individual properties of texts, which Chapter One began by calling for, should not necessitate a complete rejection of the contextual background that concepts such as the star image and persona offer to such analysis, nor should it underplay the formal specificities of film form. It may be the contention of this thesis that the properties of the film should be primary in its analysis, but that doesn't mean other pertinent factors should not be allowed to illuminate those properties. Far from accepting Baron and Carnicke's desire to distinguish between character, actor and star in order to focus only on the actor, therefore, the analysis that follows will be more interested in the intersection of all three and in highlighting the moments and processes whereby they coalesce and the complex significances that thereby arise.

### **From Performance to Enactment – Methods of Analysis**

Philip Drake's understanding that "any moment of star performance simultaneously invokes multiple semantic frames – of fictional character, of star persona and of generic codes and conventions" reminds us that the concepts of star image and persona produced by consumption-based approaches are still important in an analysis that seeks to focus on the star as a producer of meanings and effects.<sup>198</sup> McDonald's description of the kind of work that needs to be undertaken in star studies in the future suggests that the approach this investigation is interested in developing would fill an existing gap in the field of star study:

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<sup>197</sup> Pearson, R.E. (1992) *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 7.

<sup>198</sup> Drake, P. (2003) 'Low Blows? Theorising Performance in Post-classical Comedian Comedy' in F. Cutnick (ed.) *Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge), 188.

Further work would then need to employ textual analysis to look at the on-screen performances of stars, seeing how star acting is differentiated through particular uses of the body and voice, and emphasised through the techniques of camera, lighting sound and editing.<sup>199</sup>

In order to develop methods to further just such work it is necessary for the star's intervention in the film, and the focus of this investigation, to be designated the *star enactment* rather than using either of the terms that have previously been used to discuss this phenomenon; acting or performance. Drake acknowledges that "the question of stardom problematises the discussion of performance," and, just as he categorised acting as a subset of performance, it is now suggested that performance, in its turn, is a subset of the star enactment.<sup>200</sup> I have adopted the term *enactment* from the work of Andrew Britton, who used it to differentiate between the contributions made to a film's meanings by a star's existing image from those made by their generically determined role in the narrative.<sup>201</sup> When discussing Marlene Dietrich's appearance in the comedy Western *Destry Rides Again*, for example, he comments "one need only compare Frenchy/Dietrich with Chihuahua/Linda Darnell in *My Darling Clementine* to realise that while such a crisis is implicit in the genre its *enactment* is not" [my italics].<sup>202</sup> It can be seen that he uses the term 'enactment' to encompass more than just the star's performance, although that is inherent in the 'acting' of the enactment. The term also refers to the ways in which a star's significance may intervene in the film's meanings and effects. The usefulness of this term then is that in using it Britton explicitly differentiates between the meanings and effects of the star in the film and those of that same star in society and culture generally, arguing that "the functions of stars as embodiments/mediators of contradiction *in their films* must be rigorously distinguished from their other functions and meanings" [italics in original].<sup>203</sup> He doesn't deny that film stars bring meanings to their film appearances, but he insists on the primacy of the film moment for generating that meaning over the star's pre-existing meanings. This is a distinction that cultural studies approaches with their focus

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<sup>199</sup> McDonald, P. (2000) *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities* (London: Wallflower Press), 109.

<sup>200</sup> Drake, 'Reconceptualising Screen Performance', 80.

<sup>201</sup> Britton, A. [1998] (1991) "Stars and Genre" in Gledhill, C. (ed.) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge) 198-206.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

on stars as representations does not always find it necessary to delineate, but one which the analysis in this thesis will be careful to maintain. It is this understanding of the distinctiveness of the star in the film, and its focus on their intervention at the level of signification, that makes *enactment* an extremely useful term in this investigation into the star as a site of meaning production. Although enactment will be used to refer to a broader set of interventions than Britton uses it for in his work, nevertheless, its use grows from his use of enactment as a term that refers to the moment of the star's appearance in the film and an identification of this enactment as the primary evidence in any analysis. Philip Drake asked "How do we distinguish a star performance from that of a supporting character actor?" and using the term star *enactment* rather than *performance* is one way to ensure that this distinction is maintained in analysis.<sup>204</sup>

The use of the term 'star enactment' in this investigation contains within it both a sense of the star figure's enactment recorded on film (which, as has already been noted, differs in mode from other film performances) and the process of the film's enactment of the star's performance for the viewer, including features of mise-en-scène and mise-en-shot. The way that the different elements that make up the star enactment are delineated is laid out in *Table 1: Star Enactment Analytical Framework* (see appendix 1). These elements are designated as *key* (1.1) and *contributory* (1.2) deliberately, in order to suggest a hierarchy within the analysis for, as Pearson suggests:

While performance cannot be analysed in isolation from these other factors, one might conclude that it is the actor's delivery of his dialogue, together with his facial expressions, gesture, and posture that most vividly endow a cinematic character with life.<sup>205</sup>

The *key elements* contain all those features of the star's performance that Dyer, Higson and Naremore have already identified as making up their signifying contribution - body, face, movement, and voice - and in this way the centrality of the star in the film is acknowledged in analysis. *Contributory Elements* refers to those aspects of film form that make the performance visible or with which it interacts, such as framing, and lighting. There is also a third set of elements (1.3) whose contribution to the star enactment needs to be included in any objective analysis, which are designated *Cultural Elements*.

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<sup>204</sup> Drake, 'Reconceptualizing Screen Performance', 84.

<sup>205</sup> Pearson, R.E. (1999) 'A Star Performs: Mr. March, Mr. Mason and Mr. Maine' in A. Lovell and P. Kramer (eds) *Screen Acting* (London: Routledge), 72.

These include the star image which, as Pearson acknowledges, cannot be ignored during analysis of 'performance' as "star images function centrally . . . informing the pre-production phase, actors' interpretations of their characters, and the audience's response to the performance".<sup>206</sup> The inclusion of other contributing contextual factors such as genre, preferred performance styles and production conditions also provides a more objective grounding for an investigation that could otherwise be accused of basing too many of its claims on personal response. For as Pearson warns:

Any study of performance that aspires to more than personal idiosyncrasy must correct for personal bias by augmenting textual analysis with other methodologies and must also remain constantly aware of the cultural and historical specificity of performance codes.<sup>207</sup>

The designation *star enactment* and the features that it encompasses has been developed, therefore, in order to maintain just such an awareness, as well as to allow the investigation to move beyond the limitations of the categories of performance and acting. In this way it is possible to be more specific about the way stars convey meanings and generate responses within films.

Although it has been noted that the star has been dislodged from the centre of star studies by approaches that seek to place the intentionality for the significance of star enactments at other sites, it does not follow that the aim in this thesis is to construct an alternative hypothesis in which the star is found to be solely responsible for those significances. As has been demonstrated already in this chapter, analyses of performance can sometimes suffer from a search which assumes that meaning and significance can only be produced by direct agency. This thesis will proceed by rejecting the intentional fallacy behind this assumption, and instead will focus on the constructed nature of all film significance and effect. This means the effects of institutional contexts, audience reception, casting decisions, mise-en-scène and editing can all be accounted for in the site where they coalesce: the point designated in this thesis as the star enactment. This should not be seen as equivalent to granting the star figure agency, or even primacy, over these other elements, but it does identify the site of meaning production on which the analysis will be focused. Only by putting the star at the centre of the

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>207</sup> Pearson, R.E. (1992) *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 16.

investigation will all the ways in which the star as a cinematic phenomenon generates complex and challenging meanings and effects become clear.

This understanding of the star enactment will also allow the work to overcome the frequently cited ontological difficulty with discussing film performance which is perhaps best summed up by the questions Pamela Robertson Wojcik poses:

To what degree is film acting a function of what an actor does with his voice, face and body and to what degree is it technologically determined?

What are the specifically cinematic components of acting?

How do editing, framing, and sound effect or produce film performance?

When and how can aspects of persona and performance outweigh the function of close-ups and other cinematic techniques?

To what degree do extra-textual factors affect film performance?<sup>208</sup>

If one is willing to posit the entire star enactment as the subject of enquiry however, rather than just the *performance* features of it, then these questions become less pressing. With this method it is not necessary to attempt to isolate the effect of voice, face and body as opposed to editing, framing and sound but rather to consider the effect of them together. This ontological problem has however been considered insurmountable by many writers, including Barry King, who claims that:

In the analysis of the specific film texts – the only level at which it might be possible to distinguish the specific contribution of the actor to characterisation – it is by no means clear where the actor's contribution, as opposed to the director's, cinematographer's, editor's or other actors' contributions, begins and ends.<sup>209</sup>

It is the contention of this thesis, however, that the reason this distinction can never really be definitively drawn is because there are not two separate ontological categories available for analysis, as it seems to suggest. Even before the intervention of editing and soundtrack, camera position and lighting have already mediated the pro-filmic moment. The star enactment that will be placed at the centre of this star study, therefore, doesn't attempt to distinguish between the pro-filmic and the filmic

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<sup>208</sup> Robertson Wojcik, P. (2004) *Movie Acting: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge), 9.

<sup>209</sup> King, B. (1991) 'Articulating Stardom' in J.G. Butler (ed.) *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 136.

(the performance of the star and the performance of the film) as many studies of acting and performance do, nor does it accept that as a useful, or even viable, distinction; for the permutations of the pro-filmic are often unrecoverable and the pursuit of evidence of agency and intention an intractable distraction.

What the star enactment analysis framework is designed to highlight is the very constructed nature of that enactment, and this understanding undermines such assumptions about agency radically. The pro-filmic star performance, for example, may produce an expressive facial expression but only a certain camera position and editing sequence renders it legible. Equally, effects of make-up and costume cannot be factored out of the significance and effect of the star enactment, especially given the importance to Hollywood cinema of the attractiveness of the star which is not always acknowledged in analysis.<sup>210</sup> The elements designated within the star enactment framework dispense with questions of agency in a more profound way however. Using this approach an analysis of the star enactment of Debbie Reynolds in *Singin' in the Rain* for example, can also include her dubbed-over singing voice, which was actually provided by Betty Royce. This becomes possible because the star enactment is not being fixed to the agency of one human being, but is acknowledged as a filmic construction achieved through the specific processes of film production. This understanding will also therefore allow for those moments when the bodies of stunt performers and body doubles may take the place of the body of the star (in stunt work or nude scenes for example) to be confidently encompassed within the analysis. Perhaps one reason for the exclusive focus on performances in realist drama and on the mode of acting in many studies of film acting is that these modes produce examples where presence and agency can be most securely located by the analyst in the single body of the film performer. Focusing on the star enactment, however, allows this investigation to move the debate beyond the search for a single originating agency for the meanings and effects produced, by identifying as its primary material the recorded and projected moment.

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<sup>210</sup> "Physical attractiveness is an area of acting which has hardly been discussed by film scholars...But ... it has always been closely associated with acting...And there is no doubt that it forms an important part of an audience's response to an actor." A. Lovell and P. Kramer (eds) (1999) *Screen Acting* (London: Routledge), 6-7.

## Aesthetics and Style Phenomenology – Description and Interpretation

Having identified the star enactment as the focus for the analysis of Charlton Heston as a film star that will follow in this thesis, it is necessary to explain what methods will be utilised in order to comment meaningfully on its significance. This leads to perhaps the most vexed methodological question of all for the investigation, and suggests another powerful reason behind the search for agency in much analysis of star performance features which has been criticised in this chapter. Where can meaning be said to come from without recourse to the understandings of how films mean proposed by grand theories, or to another originating agency such as an auteur director or film actor? Part of the answer to that question is provided by the various and varied practices of aesthetic and stylistic film analysis which this thesis draws on for its methodology. An aesthetic approach is one that is interested in how and what films mean for, as Peter Lehman argues in his defence of the aesthetic approach, “on the most basic level, what a film is about cannot even be discussed without first attending to compositional features of the projected filmic text”.<sup>211</sup> There is a growing body of recent work in film studies which takes a similarly aesthetic approach in order to engage with questions of how form influences meaning and it seems that Geoffrey Nowell-Smith’s call for “a return to theories of the aesthetic so thoughtlessly cast aside a quarter of a century ago” has been heeded.<sup>212</sup> Andrew Klevan, for example, has specifically focused on analysing performance “as an internal element of style in synthesis with other aspects of film style” which is as clear a definition of an aesthetic approach as one could hope to find.<sup>213</sup> But for an aesthetic approach to be useful for this investigation it has to move beyond mere description of form and make a case for practices of interpretation, reading and significance for, as Pearson points out, “assessment of the meaning of performance requires not just description but interpretation”.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Lehman, P. (2008) ‘Script/Performance/Text: Performance Theory and Auteur Theory’ in B.K. Grant (ed.) *Auteurs and Authorship* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 164.

<sup>212</sup> Nowell-Smith, G. (2000) ‘How Films Mean, or, from Aesthetics to Semiotics and Half-way Back Again’ in C. Gledhill and L. Williams (eds) *Re-inventing Film Studies* (London: Hodder Arnold), 10-11.

<sup>213</sup> Klevan, A. (2005) ‘Preface’ in *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation* (London: Wallflower Press).

<sup>214</sup> Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures*, 7.



This is accepted by Gibbs and Pye who argue that “a central advantage of rooting interpretation in the detail of the film, the results of specific decisions taken by the filmmakers, is that it provides a material and verifiable basis for discussion”.<sup>215</sup> It is through the detailed renderings of film moments and sequences, which make up the majority of the analytical chapters of this thesis, that my comments on the significance of Charlton Heston’s star enactments will rest, and it is in this way that the methods adopted are grounded in an aesthetic understanding. Peter Lehman explains how such formal analysis can elucidate films when he suggests that:

Aesthetic texts do not embody something which already exists, they do not say something we already know....They are, rather, self-focusing texts where how something is said uniquely becomes part of what is said.<sup>216</sup>

In this way the very act of analysing and describing the features of star enactments also reveals what is significant about them. Kristin Thompson makes a similar point about how an aesthetic approach, as opposed to an ideological/psychoanalytical one, allows the writer more freedom to reach new understandings of films:

I will be assuming here that we usually analyze a film because it is intriguing. In other words there is something about it that we *cannot* explain on the basis of our approach’s existing assumptions.<sup>217</sup>

As the questions this investigation is interested in posing about the film star cannot be fully explained by present approaches, this would appear to be the point star study has reached. An aesthetic approach will be adopted, therefore, as it is one that will allow these questions to be investigated in an open-minded way, whilst also keeping the material of the star enactment to the forefront of the analysis through an alertness to form.

But the conclusions that this investigation wishes to draw, and the areas of experience it wants to focus on, are perhaps broader, more challenging and certainly more engaged than a purely formal analysis

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<sup>215</sup> Gibbs, J. and D. Pye (eds) (2005) *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 4.

<sup>216</sup> Lehman, ‘Script/Performance/Text’, 165.

<sup>217</sup> Thompson, K. (1988) *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 4-5.

allows for. Issues such as pleasure and beauty, for example, are not explicitly addressed in most stylistic approaches, and this is where I turn to the phenomenological approach.<sup>218</sup> A phenomenological approach is willing to go beyond the purely formal to also include the felt and lived experience of the spectator. From this perspective the experience of cinema is described as being “marked by the way in which significance and the act of signifying are *directly* felt, *sensuously* available to the viewer” [italics in original].<sup>219</sup> This approach can thus engage with both the significance of films and the processes by which that significance is created. Vivian Sobchack makes this explicit claim when she argues that “film has the capacity and competence to signify, to not only *have* sense but also to *make* sense through a unique and systemic form of communication” [italics in original].<sup>220</sup> This view thus directly challenges those approaches discussed in Chapter One which, according to Dudley Andrew, mean “we can speak of codes and textual systems which are the results of signifying processes, yet we seem unable to discuss that mode of experience we call signification,” and presents means and methods through which signification may be addressed.<sup>221</sup>

One of the ways in which this is possible is because phenomenological work, in contrast to other theoretical approaches, is willing to make a claim for significance as apprehended by the spectator who is also the academic. Sobchack explicitly defends such a move:

In the context of current theoretical practice, it is not only optimistic but also responsible to recognize that the spectator’s uniquely situated and contingent vision intentionally shapes the signs and meaning of the film’s vision as much as the film’s uniquely situated and contingent vision intentionally shapes the spectator’s.<sup>222</sup>

This appeal to the writer’s response has always been a sticking point for critics of aesthetic approaches to film, but F. P. Tomasulo insists that “phenomenological intuitions are not simple

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<sup>218</sup> Although one of the essays in Gibbs and Pye’s collection has the term ‘visual pleasure’ in its title, the majority of its chapters are concerned with issues of meaning and interpretation. Gibbs and Pye, *Style and Meaning*, *ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> Sobchack, V. (1992) *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 8.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>221</sup> Andrew, D. (1985) ‘The Neglected Tradition of Phenomenology in Film Theory’ in B. Nichols (ed.) *Movies and Methods Volume II* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 627.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

experiences, but complex, highly structured interpretive (and potentially meaning-producing) acts".<sup>223</sup> Sobchack's phenomenological approach to film can also be seen to be in sympathy with the aims of this investigation when she asks "what else is the primary task of film theory if not to restore to us, through reflection upon that experience and its expression, the original power of the motion picture to signify?"<sup>224</sup> This question reminds us of the suggestion at the beginning of this chapter that understanding the significance of stars and the ways in which they can influence the meanings of films is an important, even urgent, question for film study as a whole.

One final issue that an aesthetic/phenomenological approach raises for this investigation is the question of how to write about film and film experiences in order to express the star enactment's significances and effects, for, as Klevan argues, "only if we evoke the 'fictional charge' of a film will we be meeting the spirit in which the film performers move before us".<sup>225</sup> Dudley Andrew has commented on how phenomenological accounts of the film experience seem to be able to achieve something of this effect through their "speculative aura which struggles to go beyond the mere enumeration of repeated elements and to capture the quality of the experience we live through".<sup>226</sup> An aesthetic/phenomenological approach thus demands a more rhetorically engaged style of writing if it is to successfully recreate the 'aura' and 'fictional charge' of the film for the reader. A model for such a rhetorical style is provided by the practice of 'ekphrasis'. This term was originally coined by classical Greek rhetoricians to describe a trope in literature in which works of art, whether real or imagined, are described by the writer in detail. The most regularly cited examples of this literary ekphrasis are the description of Achilles' shield in *The Iliad* and John Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. More recently though, an ekphrastic style of writing has been developed by art historians in order to describe and evoke works of visual art such as painting and sculpture in their critical writing. Stern and Kouvaros have suggested that it could equally be applied to film writing as "in order to set the scene before the

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<sup>223</sup> Tomasulo, F.P. (1990) 'Phenomenology: Philosophy and Media Theory – An Introduction', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 12, 3, 1.

<sup>224</sup> Sobchack, V. *The Address of the Eye*, 3.

<sup>225</sup> Klevan, *Film Performance*, 16.

<sup>226</sup> Andrew, 'The Neglected Tradition of Phenomonology', 630.

eyes of the reader the writer needs to deploy a notional ekphrasis, or a degree of fictionalisation".<sup>227</sup>

The usefulness of their approach for this thesis is highlighted by their insight that in writing about film performances one faces the descriptive challenge of "how to convey, in language, not merely the scene that is being analysed but its effect".<sup>228</sup> In their focus on bodily affect they can be seen to be in sympathy with a phenomenological approach, even though they don't share its philosophical underpinnings, as both share a desire to "ground the senses in the embodied subject in its reciprocal relation with the world; allowing it to recapture something of our rich, pre-reflexive experience."<sup>229</sup>

## Approach and Method

This chapter's outline of the thesis' methodology reveals the piecemeal adoption of useful approaches and methods that characterises this work as middle-level research. 'Piecemeal' is not synonymous with 'unsystematic' however. The aesthetic approaches adopted all share an interest in the form of film and how formal features generate significance and effect. Similarly the methods of analysis developed, especially the analytical categories encompassed within the term 'star enactment' and outlined in the star analysis framework, allow for the star's appearance in the film to retain the necessary primacy for the recentring of the star that this thesis is interested in effecting. The style of writing which will be used when rendering the star enactment has also been given more consideration than is usual, in order for the analysis to acknowledge and retain the sense of the film as more than a text but also a phenomenological/aesthetic experience which evokes emotional responses, including pleasure. This hierarchical designation of the elements in the star enactment analysis framework does not mean, however, that the contextual insights which production-based investigations can bring to studies of star appearances and performance styles will be ignored. Their presence in the framework under the heading extra-filmic elements means that they will also be acknowledged and investigated in the rest of the thesis. The analysis will therefore be alert to the movement between different performance *modes* within Heston's film appearances, as well as to the differences in his performance *style* that may be due to changing generic and historical contexts between his films.

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<sup>227</sup> Stern, L. and G. Kouvaros (eds) (1999) *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* (Sydney: Power Publications), 17.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>229</sup> Dengerink Chaplin, A. (2002) 'Phenomenology' in B. Gaut and D. McIver Lopes (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Routledge), 170.

Rather than immediately applying these new approaches and methods however, it is necessary in the next chapter to return to the approaches that have already been rejected as models for this investigation in order to investigate why the figure of Charlton Heston has been both neglected and misread in previous work in star studies. This overview will allow the investigation to identify the star image that Charlton Heston now has within film studies and highbrow culture. In engaging with and correcting these 'readings' of Heston through a more careful focus on his star enactments the beginnings of a more nuanced understanding of Charlton Heston and what will be designated his 'star aesthetic' will emerge. For, although a systematic and detailed way of acknowledging the star as a site of meaning production has now been proposed, the second major aim of this thesis, to posit Charlton Heston and his films as worthy objects of study, still needs to be achieved.

### Three      Heroes and Heels: Reading Charlton Heston

*I return to the need for more specific, local studies, where the focus would be less on large theories that can account for everything, and more on the play and variation that exist at particular juncture - Judith Mayne: Cinema and Spectatorship.*<sup>230</sup>

If star study has failed to produce a “large theory that can account for everything,” it has abounded in “specific, local studies” of individual stars. It seems incumbent on this investigation therefore to apply its ideas about the star as both a cinematic phenomenon and a site of meaning production to a specific star. This will mean considering the meanings and effects of Charlton Heston’s star enactments through the application of the theoretical approaches and analytical methods outlined in Chapter Two. Before that can be done, however, it is necessary for this chapter to engage with two key issues. The first issue arises from methodological questions that are only rarely explicitly addressed in star studies and yet are central to it as an academic field. How does a study define a film star and how does it then select which stars to use in its work? We have already seen how production- and consumption-based approaches are likely to have very different means of defining and identifying film stars from each other; with production-based approaches more willing to use institutional evidence such as studio contracts, and consumption-based ones focusing more on the discourses of fans and publicity. We have also seen how methodological questions about the selection criteria applied in star study have been largely ignored or sidestepped by many previous studies. Explicitly engaging with these questions, however, will allow this chapter to both locate Heston historically and culturally in relation to other film stars and to develop the argument for seeing him as an unjustly neglected figure.

Once this important institutional and historical contextualisation of Heston’s figure has been achieved, the chapter proceeds to investigate the second issue: Heston’s cultural and academic image. Charlton Heston’s present star image is not only the result of film publicity and promotion but has also been created by the use of his star figure by academics in the various fields and debates within film studies.

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<sup>230</sup> Mayne, J. (1998) *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge).

In engaging critically with these readings of Heston, the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches identified in Chapter One will be illustrated in more detail and, in countering them with evidence from analysis of Heston's star enactments, the strengths of this investigation's methodology will be illustrated. It will also allow the thesis to acknowledge, as Dyer does, that:

Not only do different elements predominate in different star images, but they do so at different periods in the star's career. Star images have histories, and histories that outlive the star's own lifetime.<sup>231</sup>

In tracing the history of the academic image of Charlton Heston that is evident in readings of his star figure, the specifically filmic evidence that is used to support these interpretations will also be re-examined and, at times, their partiality will be exposed. Andrew Britton argued that "no film theory is worth anything which does not stay close to the concrete and which does not strive continually to check its own assumptions and procedures in relation to producible texts," and the lack of such checks in these readings further justifies this thesis' questioning of the value of such approaches.<sup>232</sup> It is through this appeal to the concrete evidence found in his star enactments, therefore, that this chapter will be alert to those recurring stylistic and compositional features of Heston's star enactments that may be ascribed to the influence of his star aesthetic.

### **Questions of Methodology: Why Charlton Heston?**

Ian C. Jarvie makes some interesting observations on the often uncritical methods of identification and selection of stars to investigate which are applied within star study. He suggests that "many writers on stars simply select those who happen to interest them; just as unsatisfactory is to select past stars who are presently remembered and revered".<sup>233</sup> In his search for more objective criteria through which to identify stars who may be fruitful objects for investigation, he rejects production-related criteria such as salary and billing, but he also rejects culturalist methods such as appeals to public opinion or levels of press coverage. He concludes that the most reliable and objective criterion is provided by a film's takings at the box office, arguing that "the box office, then, appears to be the best guide" for a more

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<sup>231</sup> Dyer, R. (1987) *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: British Film Institute and Macmillan), 3.

<sup>232</sup> Britton, A (1986) 'In Defence of Criticism', *CineAction!*, 3, 4, 3.

<sup>233</sup> Jarvie, I.C. (2004) 'Stars and Ethnicity: Hollywood and the United States, 1932-51' in L. Fischer and M. Landy (eds) *Stars: The Film Reader* (London and New York: Routledge), 168.

objective survey of film stars.<sup>234</sup> His evidence for a star's success at the box office however, is taken from the annual exhibitors' polls of the ten top-drawing stars of the year, which have been collected and published by the film trade press in the U.S. since 1932.<sup>235</sup> Unfortunately, although actual box-office figures may offer the objective criterion Jarvie seeks, these polls are not based on raw box-office takings; they are in fact opinion polls which rank which stars film theatre owners *believed* were the top box-office attractions for the year.<sup>236</sup> These polls therefore do not offer the purely objective selection of stars to study which Jarvie seems to suggest they do.

Despite this caveat however, if scholars were to rely on these polls when selecting star subjects for investigation it would lead to some very interesting work, given that they reflect a very well informed and contemporary view of who were the major film stars in any given year. These polls quite often include stars who have fallen from contemporary public awareness for example, including many comedian and musical stars who receive relatively little scholarly attention at the moment. The editor of a collection of these polls highlights this disjunction between the historic and present-day reputation of certain stars when he notes "it is interesting to learn how frequently Abbott and Costello were cited during the 1940s".<sup>237</sup> Using the Quigley polls alone has certain other disadvantages, however. The fact that Charlton Heston never appeared in these polls demonstrates how only including ten stars a year can leave some very significant performers out of consideration, and the frequency with which a star's films appeared will also have a distorting effect on this kind of annual poll. Nevertheless, Jarvie's main point, that more objective criteria should be employed in the selecting of film stars to study, remains a strong one.

Bruce Babington has also raised similar methodological concerns about the loose definition of the star that seems to exist within film studies when he asks "who is a star?".<sup>238</sup> He argues that the point of trying to introduce some methodological rigour to this question "is not to try to construct some infallible

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> 'Each year Quigley Publications asks film exhibitors in the United States to name that year's Top Box Office Stars.' Steinberg, C. (1981) *Reel Facts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), 476.

<sup>236</sup> These polls are reproduced in Steinberg, *Reel Facts*, 471-482.

<sup>237</sup> *Reel Facts*, *ibid.*, 476.

<sup>238</sup> Babington, B. (2001) *British Stars and Stardom: From Alma Taylor to Sean Connery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 6.



litmus test for stardom . . . but to suggest that the issue is less theoretically resolvable than is sometimes thought".<sup>239</sup> He therefore offers four central criteria for stardom which he feels should be met before a performer is placed in this category by scholars:

- 1 to constitute a - often the - major attraction of a film for substantial audiences
- 2 to bear the marks of special treatment, significant specularisation, within the films
- 3 to exhibit what is called 'personification' (i.e. an iconic transtextual sameness beneath variations), and
- 4 to be the subject of 'star discourse' in intertextual media (newspaper, magazines, radio, television).<sup>240</sup>

These definitions suggest Babington is willing to accept a more culturalist understanding of the star than Jarvie is. His first point, for example, allows for the audience's reaction to play a part in the process of identifying a star and his fourth takes into account the secondary discourses that they appear in. His second definition, however, is an extremely insightful one for the aesthetic approach being adopted in this investigation, as it relies on evidence from within the film itself. It also suggests an answer to a particularly interesting question in star study, which is when do a fading film star's appearances in films stop being starring roles? Babington's precision in this area also leads him to making the important point that different levels of stardom exist within the broad category of 'film star'. To reflect this he proposes a more nuanced continuum of levels of stardom, moving from 'Hollywood superstar' at one end to 'significant performer' at the other.<sup>241</sup>

By far the most detailed and economically grounded approach to this question, however, has been taken by John Sedgwick in his chapter on 'Product Differentiation in the Movies'.<sup>242</sup> Like Babington, he suggests it would be useful to distinguish subtypes of stars within the broad category of Hollywood star. He makes these distinctions, however, by considering both the frequency and popularity of a star's films. The number of films a star made over a period of

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>242</sup> Sedgwick, J. (2005) 'Product Differentiation at the Movies: Hollywood 1945 to 1965' in J. Sedgwick and M. Pokorny (eds) *An Economic History of Film* (London and New York: Routledge), 186-217.

time is used to place them in categories of high-, medium- or low-volume stars, and the frequency with which those films featured in the top ten films of the year further distinguishes between frequent, recurring or occasional stars.<sup>243</sup> These distinctions seem to offer not only objective criteria by which to distinguish stars from other film performers, but also to differentiate between different kinds of stars, especially between those who were economically significant compared to those who were perhaps more culturally significant. Thus for the period 1946-1965 he categorises Gregory Peck and John Wayne as high-volume frequent top-ten stars, whereas Peter O'Toole and Marilyn Monroe were low-volume occasional top-ten stars.<sup>244</sup> This economic analysis would seem to confirm the weakness with consumption-centred approaches to stars which was raised in Chapter One, which is that the stars they focus on and treat as most significant may not have been the most popular or watched stars of their time.

The choice of Charlton Heston, therefore, appears to be both an obvious and at the same time, a perverse one. He is an obvious choice because of his undoubted status as the star of some of the highest grossing and most culturally significant films of the post-Paramount era.<sup>245</sup> According to Sedgwick's analysis he would be defined as a low-volume recurring star for the years 1946-1965, but given that he didn't arrive in Hollywood until five years after the period covered by Sedgwick's analysis and had appeared in three more top ten films by 1974, it would be more accurate to define him as a high-volume recurring star during the peak of his career. Heston's present-day significance as an important film star of the past, which would allow him to fulfil Babington's criteria of exhibiting 'personification', can also be established through the evidence of his self-referential film and television appearances: not only major films such as *True Lies* (James Cameron, 1994), *Wayne's World 2* (Penelope Spheeris, 1994) and *Planet of the Apes* (Tim Burton, 2001) but also his cameo appearance as himself in the television serial *Friends*.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 209-210.

<sup>245</sup> By *culturally* significant I'm referring to Heston's place in mass culture. *The Ten Commandments* (DeMille, 1956), for example, was broadcast on the ABC television network in the US every Easter Sunday for 21 years.

<sup>246</sup> *Friends* season 4, episode 14, 'The One with Joey's Dirty Day'.

## Why not Charlton Heston? - Heston's Academic Star Image

Although these cameo appearances reflect Heston's image in American/western popular culture as both a figure of authority and an actor of considerable prestige and skill, this status has yet to be reflected in work in film studies and so he can also be seen as a perverse choice for academic study. Heston's lack of status as an object of study has been commented on by Lem Dobbs, who pointed out that unlike other male stars of the '50s and '60s, "Heston does not find himself a hip movie icon in the Bogart/Mitchum/McQueen class".<sup>247</sup> The reasons for the relative lack of attention and respect that has been paid to the star figure of Charlton Heston in academic film studies are found in both his film roles and his public life. As was suggested in Chapter One, cultural studies approaches choose to focus on stars whose personas challenge rather than reinforce social values, and Heston's film roles can not easily be seen to embody such challenges. Nor does his association with middlebrow genres and values make him any more attractive; the fear for the theorist being that choosing to investigate Heston may be seen to reveal undesirable middlebrow cultural values in themselves.<sup>248</sup> This danger is not associated with analysing the truly popular which, as Bourdieu points out, maintains a clear enough distance from high culture for distinctions of taste to be maintained.<sup>249</sup>

The extra-filmic reasons for neglecting Heston include his reactionary image generally and, after 1998, his association with the National Rifle Association (NRA) specifically. The level of controversy Heston's acceptance of this role generated, even in the U.S., is suggested by the comments of Michael Levine who was Heston's publicist at the time. He counselled Heston strongly against accepting the position, not through any political or moral objections, but purely on the grounds of the damage it would do to his image, arguing that "it wasn't just failing to expand the Heston brand; it was deteriorating what had existed to begin with."<sup>250</sup> Heston's refusal to take his advice led to Levine

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<sup>247</sup> Dobbs, L. (1996) 'Dad's the Word', *Sight and Sound*, 6, 2, 12.

<sup>248</sup> "Indeed, as Bourdieu found in his study of French culture, the kinds of blockbusters with which Heston was associated were precisely those that appealed to middlebrow taste." M. Jancovich, (2004) 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom: Spectacle and Performance in the Development of the Blockbuster' in A. Willis (ed.) *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 67.

<sup>249</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press), 60.

<sup>250</sup> Levine, M. (2003) *A Branded World: Adventures in Public Relations and the Creation of Superbrands* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons inc.), 149.

resigning because, he says, "I felt his brand identity was being compromised, and he would not heed my advice to repair it."<sup>251</sup> These controversial aspects of Heston's public image can be seen to merge with an existing critical wariness and result in a lack of serious engagement with the figure of Charlton Heston in film studies in proportion to his significance.

Just one example of this attitude to the figure of Charlton Heston can be found on the academic website *Senses of Cinema*, which is partly funded by Melbourne University.<sup>252</sup> Their online poll for the best and worst of the millennium included the category 'best' and 'worst' screen performer and Charlton Heston appears in both categories. He is judged one of the best, 'pre-NRA' and one of the worst, 'post-NRA'. Clearly this is a light-hearted comment (the poll is introduced by one Sean O'Faileur), nevertheless behind the screen of humour it can be seen to state overtly what is covertly happening: the political unease generated by Heston's public life can seep into academic assessments of his significance as a cinematic performer. This cultural distaste does not mean the figure of Charlton Heston has been totally ignored by academic studies, on the contrary, it has been repeatedly evoked in the various debates that have characterised film and star study since the 1960s. It remains the case though that there has been little serious engagement with the star figure of Charlton Heston as a focus of sustained analysis. It is, nevertheless, how these debates have engaged with the enactments of Charlton Heston that will now be traced in order to challenge these readings.

### **The Heston Aesthetic**

The star enactments of Charlton Heston as a subject for academic study were first, and famously, considered by Michel Mourlet in *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1960.<sup>253</sup> Mourlet was writing for *Cahiers* at the height of its commitment to the *politique des auteurs*, a critical stance that took not only an iconoclastic approach to the role of the film director but also to that of the film critic. This stance included the belief that the *Cahiers* critic should only write about those works and artists they felt strongly about and

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<sup>251</sup> Levine, M. *A Branded World*, 13.

<sup>252</sup> O'Faileur, S. (2000) 'The Best and Worst of the Millennium', *Senses of Cinema*, 2, 22 Oct. 2011  
<<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2000/feature-articles/bestandworst/>>

<sup>253</sup> Mourlet, M. (1998) 'In Defence of Violence' in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge), 233-235.

wished to value, rather than attempting to maintain an objective distance from the material on which they were commenting.<sup>254</sup> Mourlet's radical comments on Heston need to be considered in this light, as his celebratory reading of Charlton Heston as symbolising the whole of cinema as an enunciatory form makes later claims made for Heston's various meanings appear not just limited but cowardly. For Mourlet then, Heston is not just a cinematic phenomenon but *the* cinematic phenomenon, one who "provides a more accurate definition of the cinema than films like *Hiroshima Mon Amour* or *Citizen Kane*." <sup>255</sup>

This bold statement has been regularly treated with such academic scepticism by later critics that it is important to consider Mourlet's argument in more detail. It is easy to forget that the focus of his article was not Charlton Heston (although it is his remarks about Heston that are now most often quoted from it) nor was it even primarily concerned with stars as signifiers in films. The focus of Mourlet's article is cinema aesthetics and his belief that "cinema is the art most attuned to violence".<sup>256</sup> He discusses film stars in order to illustrate his argument that "in elevating the actor, mise-en-scène finds in violence a constant source of beauty".<sup>257</sup> His description of this violence demonstrates why for him Heston is axiomatic: "violence springs from man's actions, that moment when a pent-up force overflows and breaches the damn, an angry torrent smashing into anything that stands in its way".<sup>258</sup> As will become evident, the performance of pent-up and finally unleashed anger is one of the most widely recognised aspects of Heston's star enactments and a key feature of his aesthetic. Despite this specificity, however, Heston is actually only one of a number of stars who for Mourlet represent the particular type of hero he is celebrating: "a hero both cruel and noble, elegant and manly, a hero who reconciles strength with beauty . . . and represents the perfection of a lordly race." <sup>259</sup> Mourlet also makes no

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<sup>254</sup> "The requirements of la politique des auteurs are well known...a film was reviewed by the critic who admired it the most, thus ensuring that cinema was celebrated rather than condemned" Caughie, J. (1981) 'The Director Comes of Age', *The Movie*, No. 90, 1787.

<sup>255</sup> Mourlet, 'In Defence of Violence', 234.

<sup>256</sup> 'In Defence of Violence', *ibid.*, 233.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> The other stars Mourlet mentions are Fernando Lamas, Robert Wagner and Jack Palance. *Ibid.*, 233.

apologies for his endorsement and enjoyment of the 'fascistic' overtones inherent in such a Nietzschean concept of morality and heroism which other writers on Heston have found more troubling.

Heston demonstrates Mourlet's vision of what is, for him, cinema's specific contribution to art but he also, before Dyer's more complex theorising, posited Heston as a site of meaning production and it is these claims that have proved more influential than his overall argument. Mourlet's contention that "he constitutes a tragedy in himself, his presence in any film being enough to instil beauty" suggests that Heston's star enactments can be seen to create meaning in a film, but this meaning creation is limited strictly for Mourlet to Heston's presence.<sup>260</sup> This is why Mourlet describes the star as an aspect of *mise-en-scène*, as any meanings they bring are seen as being generated pro-filmically through their appearance. Mourlet's characterisation of the star's presence as "what he has been given" denies other features of the star enactment any agency in the meanings it may generate.<sup>261</sup> Closer analysis of Mourlet's description of Heston's presence, however, reveals how only some of the features he delineates can be ascribed solely to Heston's pro-filmic appearance:

The pent-up violence expressed by the sombre phosphorescence of his eyes, his eagle's profile, the imperious arch of his eyebrows, the hard, bitter curve of his lips, the stupendous strength of his torso.<sup>262</sup>

Some of these features are clearly due to filmic interventions into the pro-filmic presence of Heston, whether this is defined as performance or not. Nearly all of the adjectives used by Mourlet to describe Heston's appearance, for example, *bitter*, *imperious*, *hard*, *sombre* are actually referring to the effects of what most critics would characterise as performance. That Mourlet does not, or cannot, recognise this reveals that his championing of Heston is not, as it may at first appear, an intervention on the part of the star as a site of meaning production. For Mourlet, as for many auteur critics, a star is still merely another aspect of *mise-en-scène*, as can be seen when Mourlet concludes that "through him *mise-en-scène* can confront the most intense of conflicts".<sup>263</sup> Although Mourlet's description of cinema as "an art that represents the pursuit of happiness through the drama of the body" would seem to put the star

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> 'In Defence of Violence', *ibid.*

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

enactment right at the heart of cinematic signification, his auteurist perspective still sees the star presence as only one aspect, albeit a pre-eminent one, of *mise-en-scène*.<sup>264</sup>

Mourlet's comments must also be seen as part of the polemical tradition of *Cahiers du Cinema*, in which extreme and controversial statements were regularly made in order to support the critics' arguments, rather than as a considered intervention on behalf of the star figure as a signifying phenomenon. Mourlet's real concern, and the focus of the rest of the article, is the auteur directors who dominated contemporary debates in the journal. Nevertheless, Mourlet's comments on Heston defined the boundaries for most discussions of Heston that followed. His use of the term *presence* to categorise an acceptable focus for auteurists wanting to comment on the significance of stars, for example, was adopted in future discussions of Heston's star image and Colin McArthur referred explicitly to Mourlet's arguments in his 1967 *Sight and Sound* article 'The Real *Presence*' [my italics].<sup>265</sup> In this article McArthur develops Mourlet's implicit recognition of the close match between Heston's presence and the epic genre, whilst retreating from Mourlet's more ambitious claims for its effects. McArthur sees Mourlet's argument as demanding a cinema of physical appearances which veers dangerously close, in his opinion, to the discourse of 'popular' fan magazines, and his unwillingness to continue with such an approach highlights one of the reasons why star study itself has for so long avoided engaging with issues of beauty and pleasure in relation to stars. McArthur articulates a discernible fear that any discourse engaging with such detail may fail to maintain the important distinction between academic practice and popular comment. McArthur, therefore, damns Mourlet's contention with faint praise, suggesting that a cinema of physical appearances "cannot, in itself, sustain a total aesthetic of the cinema, but, with its usefulness very closely defined, it is a valuable tool in the critic's kit."<sup>266</sup>

Colin McArthur accepted Mourlet's implicit auteurist conclusion that the only qualities a star can bring to a film regardless of the director's intention "are almost entirely physical" (an interesting qualification that 'almost').<sup>267</sup> But, as with Mourlet, his description of these 'entirely physical' attributes reveals how

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>265</sup> McArthur, C. (1967) 'The Real Presence', *Sight and Sound*, Summer (1967), 141-143.

<sup>266</sup> 'The Real Presence', *ibid.*, 142.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

they consist of features that go beyond the mere *presence* of the star and are more readily associated with performance; McArthur refers to “the way he walks and talks,” for example.<sup>268</sup> Although McArthur rejects Mourlet’s more challenging assertion that the star’s presence can dominate a film’s overall meaning, he does accept that stars can be a site of meaning production although, for him, this is only achieved through accruing generic significance. As he was writing in 1967, at which point Heston had appeared in eight films which could be defined as historical epics, it is unsurprising that McArthur sees Heston as “the objective correlative of the epic ideal” and can claim that “his particular physical endowments are now exposed almost exclusively within the framework of the epic”.<sup>269</sup> McArthur therefore criticises Mourlet’s definition of Heston’s presence (that it always somehow means tragedy and creates beauty) on the grounds that “Heston’s early career was comparatively obscure and undistinguished, played out competently in urban thrillers, semi-westerns and adventure yarns”.<sup>270</sup> By inference then, though not supported by evidence from film analysis, McArthur implies Heston was not always tragic and noble in these roles but that these characteristics were imbricated into the Heston image through his repeated association with the generic features of the epic.

Mourlet never refers specifically to any of Heston’s films or roles in his article and so, although it seems self-evident that his comments relate to his appearances in epic films, there is no evidence that he isn’t also referring to Heston’s appearances in other genres. Heston’s enactment in one of his earliest starring roles, as Brad Braden in the circus film *The Greatest Show on Earth* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1952) for example, can be seen to contain all the features of Heston’s presence that Mourlet’s article delineates. There is a scene in the film that demonstrates one example of this continuity when Heston/Brad’s actions are those of “an angry torrent smashing into anything that stands in its way.” Although Esther Sonnet has helpfully warned that “the sheer force of teleology raises fundamental questions as to whether early roles can be approached in a way that is not influenced by subsequent

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.



star status”<sup>271</sup> it is the evidence of the film itself which supports the contention that Heston/Brad here demonstrates many of the significances that Mourlet claimed were generated by Heston’s presence, rather than being the effect of a director or a genre’s interventions.

The sequence occurs when Brad learns of a criminal showman whose fixed gambling stall is cheating visitors to the circus. Heston/Brad’s pent-up violence is spectacularly unleashed on the stallholder and his stall, which he destroys as he vaults over the counter to confront the villain. In his anger he tears down the stall sign and slams it on the counter. He also destroys the shelves of prizes when with one punch he drives the stallholder clear through the back of his stall and all the prizes and shelves fall and crash around him. Heston/Brad’s contemptuous treatment of the villain also highlights his pride. He doesn’t deign to look at or speak to him as he wrestles his ill-gotten notes from his hand and returns them to his victims, and his final act is to throw the villain into a muddy pool. Heston/Brad’s natural superiority and nobility is also evident, not only in his height and build but in the way that he fights only with his fists, while the villain attempts to use various props against him as weapons. The final shot is of Heston/Brad standing over the prostrate hustler in unquestionable physical and moral superiority, washing clean the hand with which he hit him.

Interestingly McArthur’s article, as it originally appeared in *Sight and Sound*, was illustrated by a still of Charlton Heston in the Western *Major Dundee* (Sam Peckinpah, 1965), despite McArthur’s argument that Heston and his meanings were entirely generated by his appearances in epic films. This conflict between the written argument and its visual illustration highlights the inconsistency in McArthur’s argument that the significance of Heston arises from his close fit with the values and conventions of a single genre. Despite being taken from a Western, this image still conveys all those aspects of Heston’s presence that were identified by Mourlet; he looks tragic, beautiful and haughty, his costume emphasising “the fabulous power of his torso”. It is clear that in McArthur’s argument genre conventions were replacing auteur intentions in the writer’s search for the location of the meaning generated by a star. By not looking more closely at filmic examples of Heston’s star enactments though, McArthur is guilty of some false assumptions about how meaning is generated. Mourlet’s focus

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<sup>271</sup> Sonnet, E. (2010) ‘Girl in the Canoe: History, Teleology and the Work of Star Construction in the Early Roles of Marilyn Monroe’, *Screen*, 51, 1, 61.

on violence and action is a more accurate summation of Heston's star enactments and aesthetic than McArthur's, even if one wants to investigate the star no further than their presence, as it can be applied to Heston's appearance in a range of genres and is not restricted to his epic roles alone.

These two early detailed analyses of Heston's star enactments considered them in relation to questions of cinema aesthetics as a whole, which seems to suggest that his star figure was granted a level of seriousness that it doesn't necessarily receive today. McArthur however, was unwilling to take on board Mourlet's undoubtedly mischief-making declaration that Charlton Heston represents the true aesthetic of cinema, and instead he focused in a more limited way on the contribution a star's presence can be seen to make in a film, especially if they repeatedly appear in the same genre. He thus avoids granting the star the status of a site of meaning production and chooses to use the neutral word *qualities* to define what a star brings to a film. When Mourlet's definition of the Heston aesthetic was next evoked, however, in Richard Dyer's *Stars*, the terms of the debate had changed from those of aesthetics to those of ideology.<sup>272</sup> Mourlet's comments could hardly have been excluded from a text that is described as "the first attempt to bring together all the various critical and theoretical approaches that have been made to the phenomenon of stardom".<sup>273</sup> In Dyer's book, however, Mourlet's claim for a Heston 'aesthetic' - which is also the definition of cinema - is co-opted into Dyer's concept of the 'star image', which is not quite as all-embracing a concept.

Dyer refers to Mourlet's comments on Heston whilst identifying the phenomenon of a *problematic fit* between a star's image and the film character they are portraying. For Dyer the star image represents the star's pro-filmic contribution to the film's meaning: "audience foreknowledge, the star's name and her/his appearance . . . all already signify that condensation of attitudes and values which is the star's image".<sup>274</sup> He sees a problematic fit emerging where there is "a clash between two complex sign clusters, the star as image and the character as otherwise constructed".<sup>275</sup> Mourlet's contention that Heston is always going to represent beauty, tragedy and power regardless of what the director does is

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<sup>272</sup> Dyer, R. (1998) *Stars: New Edition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

<sup>273</sup> This is the publisher's description of the text on their website, accessed on 2/1/12.  
<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=305077> .

<sup>274</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 126

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

used as evidence by Dyer for his less ambitious argument that in some instances of problematic fit “the star’s image is so powerful that all signs may be read in terms of it”.<sup>276</sup> Having once acknowledged this however, Dyer’s approach is not really equipped to comment further on how and why Heston’s star enactments are able to achieve this level of power. Dyer’s own explanation of the focus of his investigation into star image and film character reveals just how dependent his approach is on discovering ‘contradictions’ to produce fruitful conclusions:

What analysis is concerned to do is both to discover the nature of the fit between star image and character, and, where the fit is not perfect or selective, to work out where the contradictions are articulated . . . and to attempt to see what possible sources of ‘masking’ or ‘pseudo-unification’ the film offers.<sup>277</sup>

The suspicion that this focus on contradiction in culturalist readings of star images has partly led to the neglect of Heston as a star figure is confirmed by Dyer’s fleeting reference to Heston. Although the aesthetic power of Heston’s presence in a film is acknowledged by Dyer, for him and for most cultural critics in the 1980s, aesthetics was a dangerously vague and un-theorised term and the debate around stars would continue to develop through questions of ideology and representation.

### **From Tragedy to Castration: Heston as Psychoanalytical Symptom**

The next time Heston’s star enactments were the subject of serious critical debate the aims of that debate were both less aesthetically ambitious and more theoretically complex. The terms of this debate were provided by psychoanalytical film theories and the areas under examination were masculinity and spectatorship. Laura Mulvey, in her psychoanalytic analysis of spectator/film relations, described the typical male movie star as a figure whose glamorous characteristics are those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ego ideal and suggested that the male protagonist is thus available for the narcissistic identification of the male viewer.<sup>278</sup> In his article ‘Masculinity as Spectacle’, written in direct response to Mulvey’s theories, Steve Neale was interested in exploring moments which Mulvey’s

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>277</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 131.

<sup>278</sup> Mulvey, L. (1975) ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen*, 16, 3, 6-18.

formulation did not allow for, moments in which the male protagonist is the object of the look.<sup>279</sup> In developing his arguments Neale refers to two of Heston's roles, although he doesn't investigate them in any detail. He mentions Heston in *El Cid* as an example that seems to support Mulvey's thesis, in that he is "powerful and omnipotent to an extraordinary degree".<sup>280</sup> Interestingly, although Heston/Roderigo is only one of six examples of such ego-ideal protagonists identified (and he isn't discussed in as much detail as the others) it is a full-page still image of him as *El Cid* that was used as an illustration when the article first appeared in *Screen*, with the caption "the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego." Mourlet's contention that Heston's presence speaks for itself would appear to be justified by this feature of the article.

Neale however goes on to problematise Mulvey's views by suggesting various psychic processes to explain how, still within a rigid psychoanalytical schema, male protagonists can be presented as a spectacle for the (male) viewer. It is not necessary to repeat his arguments here but it is interesting to see which features of Heston's enactments he drew on when making them. He suggests for example that, along with other examples of male combat in films, the chariot race in *Ben Hur* allows for an erotic look at Heston/Ben Hur whilst simultaneously disavowing such a look through the force of narrative drive. He also suggests that the figure of the perfect male protagonist may lead to feelings of erotic contemplation as well as identification in the viewer, feelings which are disavowed through masochistic scenarios within the films: "the threat of castration is figured in the wounds of and injuries suffered by...Charlton Heston in *Major Dundee*".<sup>281</sup> This is an interesting way to approach the tragedy that Mourlet felt was implicit in Heston's presence. We can see this idea of castration as tragedy expanded upon in Neale's discussion of Sam Peckinpah's Western heroes, where Heston/Major Dundee can be seen to represent 'lost' or 'doomed' male narcissism which "celebrates resistance to social standards and responsibilities, above all those of marriage and the family, the sphere represented by women".<sup>282</sup>

Whilst Neale's use of psychoanalytical concepts to discuss representations of masculinity does lead to an investigation of stars as both cinematic phenomena and generators of meaning, these effects are

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<sup>279</sup> Neale, S. (1983) 'Masculinity as Spectacle', *Screen*, 24, 6, 2-16.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>281</sup> Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle', 10.

<sup>282</sup> Mulvey, L. (1981) 'Afterthoughts...inspired by *Duel in the Sun*', *Framework*, 15/16/17.

analysed in a general rather than a specific way. Thus Heston's enactments are discussed alongside those of six or seven other stars who are then all used to prove the same point. For this kind of analysis then, Heston is approached more as a symptom of cinematic processes than a signifying phenomenon within them. Any aesthetic effects generated by Heston's enactments are seen as a product of the unconscious psychic impulses of the director, the viewer, or the cinematic apparatus itself. The fact that Heston is only ever one example among a number of male stars, whose enactments are all seen to demonstrate the same points, would suggest that this approach did not illuminate a great deal about Heston's specific meanings. In this account, what Mourlet figures as Heston's unique tragedy is discussed using the generalised Freudian concept of castration and, in a similar way, his specific beauty becomes representative of narcissism in general. Nevertheless, the same key features of Heston's enactments are once again identified and investigated in the essay, albeit from a very different angle, suggesting they are somehow key components of his star aesthetic. Steve Neale problematizes this aesthetic which Mourlet chose to celebrate, by questioning the meanings generated by his presence and the psychic forces that may be at work generating these meanings.<sup>283</sup> In this way the beauty and tragedy Mourlet believed to be inherent in the Heston aesthetic are seen as the products of the viewer's own desires and power.

### **Heston and Homophobia - Whose Unquiet Pleasure?**

One of the possible reasons suggested in the opening of this chapter for star study failing to engage with the figure of Charlton Heston has been supported by this overview of critical readings, for as we have seen it was the lack of obvious ideological contradictions in Heston's film roles and star image that made him an uninspiring subject for Dyer and other culturalist writers. Psychological readings, with their focus on desire, also offer evidence to support the idea that Heston has been neglected due to the uncomfortable questions he raises for some critics about the beauty of the male star figure. Neale argues, for example, that any erotic display of male bodies is undermined by a film's narrative drive, and he cites as an example the chariot race in *Ben Hur* (William Wyler, 1959). This is an arguable point however as, despite this sequence having some narrative import, it is also highly extended, allowing for a great deal of focus on Heston's body which is marked as an erotic spectacle through costume and

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<sup>283</sup> Mourlet anticipated such a response when he suggested "it takes the innocence of certain theological minds to find a political meaning in an entity which they see as replacing the devil, everywhere to be found with his pot of black paint." 'In Defence of Violence', 234.

point-of-view editing. His costume is more revealing of his body than that of the antagonist Massala, as there is a deep chest-exposing V and the sides of his tunic are also open revealing even more of his body, especially when it is in action. He is also the only charioteer to remove his helmet before the race starts, thus allowing the audience to see him more clearly. The editing of the chariot race sequence also makes it clear that he is the object of both hostile and admiring looks from the on-screen audience.

When Neale acknowledges that male heroes can at times be marked as the object of the erotic gaze, he can only imagine this as a look generated by male homosexual desire, arguing that "these pleasures are founded upon repressed homosexual voyeurism".<sup>284</sup> This comment may reveal another reason why (male) critics have been wary of analysing Heston's enactments too approvingly, if at all. The assumption that only repressed homosexual voyeurism can explain the viewers' pleasure in watching the bodily display of male film stars, creates a homophobic generated unease which is made explicit in Leon Hunt's article 'What are Big Boys Made Of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic'.<sup>285</sup> Hunt takes up Neale's psychoanalytical approach to the representations of masculinity in his analysis of *El Cid* and *Spartacus*. This leads him to focus on Charlton Heston and representations of masculinity, and the responses they generate in the spectator:

The genre is also associated with the pleasure of watching certain types of male star . . . most important of all, Charlton Heston, whose very 'presence' has prompted some very striking (male) responses.<sup>286</sup>

That Hunt explicitly draws attention to the gender of the critics whose responses he quotes, even though this is clear from their forenames, suggests that he thinks their maleness (and by implication heterosexuality) should prevent them from appreciating a male star using the physical and descriptive language that they do. He quotes some of their language in order to emphasise his point: 'Towering presence', 'heroic intensity', 'innate splendour of honest muscle'; interestingly, he quotes Mourlet's description of Heston in full. By referring to these descriptions as 'sentiments', Hunt is implying that

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<sup>284</sup> Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle', 8.

<sup>285</sup> Hunt, L. (1993) 'What Are Big Boys Made Of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic' in P. Kirkham and J. Thumin (eds.) *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* (London: Lawrence and Wishart), 65-83.

<sup>286</sup> Hunt, 'What are Big Boys Made of?', 67.

these responses are 'tainted' by homoeroticism, describing Mourlet's comments as "most breathless of all... a virtual love poem to Heston... pleasure doesn't get much more 'unquiet' than this".<sup>287</sup>

Hunt's reference to 'unquiet pleasures' is taken from an analysis of Anthony Mann films in which Paul Willemen distinguishes between the viewer's (straightforward) pleasure in watching the male 'exist' and the more ambiguous, hence 'unquiet', pleasure produced by seeing the male "mutilated and restored through violent brutality".<sup>288</sup> Willemen's quite subtle description of a viewing pleasure which is necessarily 'unquiet' because of the sadism it appeals to, is misrepresented by Hunt as being 'unquiet' because it is generated by an erotic impulse towards the male figure. There are a number of offensive assumptions behind Hunt's use of the phrase in this context. It assumes, firstly, that the viewer is a man, and although there are long-standing psychoanalytical arguments suggesting that the viewer is constructed to take a male position, this is not the same as assuming all real viewers are actually male.

Hunt's comments also assume that this male viewer is a heterosexual viewer, as it would seem unlikely that a homosexual man would be disquieted by finding pleasure in watching a male figure. What is 'unquiet' therefore is the heterosexual male feeling pleasure in looking at a man because this feeling has been marked 'homosexual' and the heterosexual male has to maintain a clear boundary between male heterosexual and male homosexual positions due to the abject position afforded male homosexuality in society. Although within the academy such an attitude towards homosexuality is overtly unacceptable, it is evidently the reason behind Hunt's specific comments and, more generally, it may explain some of the academic unwillingness to engage critically with Charlton Heston and the kind of films he appeared in.<sup>289</sup> It is interesting to note, therefore, that Mark Jancovich has suggested that it is this unease that lies behind Dwight Macdonald's revulsion at the bodily display in biblical epics,

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>288</sup> Willemen, P. (1981) 'Anthony Mann: Looking at the Male' in *Framework*, 15/16/17, 16.

<sup>289</sup> The level of hysteria generated by fear of male homosexuality is such that any behaviour which could be a symptom has to be pathologised; no female viewer is expected to be similarly disquieted by displays of the female protagonist's beauty. Perhaps the spate of female protagonists of '80s action films would be better understood as inspired not by proto-feminism but by male homophobia.

suggesting his negative response to these films “can be seen as the product of a homophobic reaction, in which the image of the male body is just too uncomfortable for the critic.”<sup>290</sup>

Apart from revealing this feature of critical thinking, Hunt’s article is also a good example of the way Heston’s figure was used in debates about representations of masculinity. For despite quoting from critics who engage with Heston’s enactments as a potential site of cinematic meaning, Hunt goes on to discuss *Spartacus* and *El Cid* in terms of character, plot and scopic economy, without further reference to the ways in which the stars themselves may be seen to influence the film’s significances. This is quite a lack when you consider what insights could emerge from commuting Charlton Heston in *El Cid* with Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus* and vice versa, not least the necessity for engaging with *why* Heston has produced such ‘striking (male) responses’ and Douglas has not; indeed, this is one of the reasons for choosing these two films and stars for commutation in Chapter Five. But as Hunt’s interest is in delineating the features of a sub-genre of the epic (the male epic) he is looking for similarities between the films rather than differences between their star enactments.

His interest in masculinity however does ensure that Heston’s enactments continue to be discussed in the light of the issues raised by such representations. Hunt develops Neale’s arguments about the erotic contemplation of male protagonists and is willing to argue for Heston as the direct object of erotic looks within a film:

In *El Cid*, for example, Rodrigo is subjected to the ambiguous gaze of Chimene during his fight with Don Martin (a rival King’s Champion), a look implying both desire *and* hatred. Elsewhere, he is the explicit object of the admiring looks of other men. . . . What I want to suggest is that eroticism/desire *are* present, but are inscribed in a more complex and ambivalent way than Neale seems to allow [*italics in original*].<sup>291</sup>

Hunt also investigates these films’ focus on the body in action and how violent spectacle and physical punishment allow for the contemplation of the male body in different ways and can convey complex ideas about masculinity. Heston/Rodrigo is associated with the iconography of crucifixion throughout *El Cid* for example and, as Hunt describes it, in his final act “man is placed on a pedestal, something to

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<sup>290</sup> Jancovich, M. (2004) ‘Dwight Macdonald and the Historical Epic’ in Y. Tasker (ed.) *Action and Adventure Cinema* (London: Routledge), 95.

<sup>291</sup> Hunt, ‘What are Big Boys Made of?’, 70.



be worshipped. But a transcendent, glowing phallus is only made possible by the death of the human subject. The ultimate Father is a corpse".<sup>292</sup> Despite his intention to analyse both films, Hunt does seem to find more of interest in *El Cid* than *Spartacus*, as he himself acknowledges: "the climax of *El Cid* invites a kind of religious awe – which I always find very moving, its ideological investments notwithstanding – at this transfigured male".<sup>293</sup> His final comments about the male epic could be applied to many of Heston's star enactments. He suggests that these films offer a "gender tour" into masculinity for both men and women, in which masculinity is unknown and unattainable. Although the tragedy that Mourlet found inherent in the aesthetic demands of the presence of Charlton Heston is here aligned to the genre rather than the star, nevertheless, the tragedy of masculinity is recognised as being most memorably and movingly embodied in that genre by Charlton Heston.

### **An Ideological Axiom of White National Conservative Masculinity**

Unlike the psychoanalytical readings of Neale and Hunt, cultural materialist engagements with the star figure of Charlton Heston have not focused on masculinity alone. In these readings, gender is inevitably aligned to representations of race, nationality and politics. Purely ideological readings of Heston's star image, such as those produced by Richard Slotkin and Steven Cohan, suggest that he represents White American Masculinity in his epic film appearances in unproblematic ways. In *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the American Frontier*, Slotkin is particularly interested in Heston's representation of race, suggesting:

The typical epic of this period centers on a "hard" and self-willed White male hero – often played by Charlton Heston – who stands for the highest values of civilisation and progress but who is typically besieged from without by enemies (often non-White and/or savages).<sup>294</sup>

Slotkin's ideological reading of Heston's star figure demonstrates many of the weaknesses of this approach to considering stars that were discussed in Chapter One. He rarely refers to specific examples from named films, for example, but instead finds similarities between all Heston's appearances, which necessitates making broad and sweeping generalisations about them. Indeed

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>294</sup> Slotkin, R. (1992) *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Athenium), 505.

he sees similar meanings being represented by a range of film stars and films, as the epics he is referring to include such disparate films as *Zulu* (Cy Endfield, 1964), *Exodus* (Otto Preminger, 1960) and *The Alamo* (John Wayne, 1960).

Slotkin does recognise certain features of Heston's enactments which have emerged in this overview of critical responses however, including his embodiment of an archaic nobility and the frequency with which his characters find themselves facing martyrdom or at least 'a last stand' but, rather than being inflected by the presence of the star, he sees these significances arising from the hero's representation of the American nation.<sup>295</sup> In these allegorical readings Heston's whiteness is argued, in a very simplistic way, to be one of the features of his star image that places him as a representative of American power and ideology. Slotkin thus argues that in *55 Days at Peking* "as in *El Cid*, the primary signifier of moral and political difference is race."<sup>296</sup> The level of unsupported assertion that lies behind such readings of the significance of race is evident however in his claim that in *El Cid* the distinction between the 'bad' African Muslims and the 'good' Spanish ones is emphasised through the dark skin of the former and light skin of the latter.<sup>297</sup> However, although the African Muslims are visually demonised in a number ways in this film, including through their costume of uniform black robes and face-obscuring scarves, there are several scenes where it is clear that, despite Slotkin's claim, they are neither cast nor made up to be darker or lighter skinned than the forces of the Spanish emirs. Indeed, in a key scene when El Cid brings a delegation of these 'good' Muslims before the Spanish king, two of them are played by African actors, whereas the villainous Ben Yussef is played by an only lightly tanned European actor, Herbert Lom.

Closer analysis of the films that Slotkin refers to, therefore, undermines his assertion that race is the primary signifier of moral and political superiority in Heston's star image, and his later suggestion that "the range of heroic styles portrayed by Heston in these films is an index of sorts to the leadership styles affected by Kennedy," reveals that Slotkin is far more interested in discussing U.S. ideological constructions under Kennedy than in engaging in specific analysis of Heston's film

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid. 505.

<sup>296</sup> *Gunfighter Nation*, ibid., 507.

<sup>297</sup> "A fanatical Islamic movement . . . whose dark-skinned, black-robed hordes have been commanded . . . to . . . subject the (light-skinned) Spanish Moslems" ibid., 506.

appearances.<sup>298</sup> His focus on films as expressions of cultural myths leads him to read all these films, and Heston's roles in them, as allegories of American political beliefs and value. Thus he 'reads' the actions of Heston/Major Lewis in *55 Days at Peking* (Nicholas Ray, 1963) in the light of US foreign policy in the 1960s, rather than in relation to Heston's other film roles or performances:

The American believes he has given a convincing demonstration of Western strength and cleverness that will deter aggression – an idea perfectly consonant with the Rand Corporation's 1960 recommendation of symbolic "posture choices" in the foreign-policy strategy.<sup>299</sup>

Slotkin's analysis therefore focuses on plot and character and rarely attempts to engage with the specific form and detail of film sequences. There would be little point in engaging with Slotkin's readings at all, given how easily they can be challenged and undermined, if they were not representative of both a form of star analysis in general and attitudes to Heston's star figure in particular. The existence of such readings and their influence on wider understandings of Heston's significance suggests that the political distaste which Heston's public image generates in many members of the academy means that readings which dismiss his film appearances as similarly conservative and borderline racist are too easily accepted.

This ideologically inspired approach to reading Heston's star figure is evident in a chapter entitled 'The Body in the Blockbuster' in Steve Cohan's book *Masked Men: Masculinity and Movies in the Fifties*, which also focuses on his perceived representation of masculinity and race, albeit in a more subtle way than in Slotkin's work.<sup>300</sup> Although only focusing on one of Heston's films, and organised in the pursuit of a much broader argument about representations of American masculinity in Hollywood films in the 1950s, this chapter nevertheless offers a good example of ideological readings of Charlton Heston's star enactments. Cohan refers more than once, for example, to what he calls Heston/Moses' 'conservative masculinity' in *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956).<sup>301</sup> He also insists on a

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 511.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 508.

<sup>300</sup> Cohan, S. (1997) 'The Body in the Blockbuster' in *Masked Men: Masculinity and Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press), 122 – 163.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 140-1.

binary distinction existing throughout the film in which Heston/Moses represents America and Yul Brynner/Rameses the alien other. This distinction is mostly based on his reading of the film's poster which, he argues, "follows the logic by which the film itself reproduces the central binarism of cold war ideology: the opposition of American and alien", rather than moments and sequences within the film itself.<sup>302</sup> Unlike Slotkin, however, Cohan does discuss and analyse film examples in some detail to suggest how this ideological meaning is created. Commenting on the resemblance which Michael Wood identified between Heston/Moses and the statue of Liberty in the final shot of the film, he argues that Heston:

Does not resemble the Statue of Liberty so much as take *her* place as the symbolic guarantee of American freedom... [this shot]... puts forward within the historical setting of cold war global politics the claims of a conservative masculinity, identified with the state itself.<sup>303</sup>

Wood is perhaps more circumspect than Cohan when he suggests that this resemblance may be accidental and "if it's not accidental . . . it's probably still not entirely intentional and I wouldn't like to guess whose unconscious is speaking in that frame".<sup>304</sup> Cohan has no qualms, however, in confidently claiming this interpretation as firm evidence for his reading of the film and he dismisses Wood's question of intentionality by suggesting that such parallels, even if they could not have been intended at the time of production, are nevertheless significant as "'profound' coincidences of history that helped to increase the timeliness of *The Ten Commandments* for the public". Whilst a political message about American ideals of liberty is undeniably present in this scene, a reading of this final shot more alert to the specificities of Heston's star enactments would also want to comment on how Moses suffers the tragic final fate of many of Heston's heroes, as it also emphasises his isolated figure as he ends the film alone, loyal to his cause, whilst his family and friends go on to enjoy the promised land. Cohan's reference to "the ideological work which the DeMille epic performs as a cold war blockbuster text" suggests how, although in a much subtler way, he is engaged in a similar allegorical reading project to Slotkin. Despite his infinitely more subtle and well-supported readings, Cohan follows the same method

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<sup>302</sup> Cohan, *ibid.*, 124.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>304</sup> Wood, M. (1989) *America in the Movies or "Santa Maria, It Had Slipped My Mind"* (New York: Columbia University Press), 187.

in finding the conclusive 'evidence' for his ideological readings in material from outside the film itself: in the film's publicity, other cultural products of the time and, most importantly, contemporary U.S. political discourse and foreign policy.

Like Slotkin, Cohan also suggests that the film's ideological messages rest on Heston's physical specificities: "the camera process brings out the actor's connotations of moral and racial superiority as embodied in his height".<sup>305</sup> And in a possibly deliberately derogatory comment he suggests "it was ultimately the actor's height more than anything else which forged his close identification with the epic genre".<sup>306</sup> This is very reminiscent of the auteurist view of the star as merely another feature of mise-en-scène but, after returning the debate to the concept of *presence* in this way, Cohan goes on to suggest that Heston's relationship with his body was not as unproblematic as those critics who had previously discussed it assume. Heston's star enactments are said to convey these meanings only through his ability to transcend his body as "his 'epic presence' thus marks the apparent subordination of his big body to a much greater ideological force: a national narrative".<sup>307</sup> Although Cohan argues that Heston's star enactment contributed to the ideological work of the film, his argument becomes somewhat circular as he also suggests the film influenced the meaning of Heston's star image:

Heston's close identification with the epic genre solidified his emerging star image as a patriarchal male as soon as the actor publicly internalised DeMille's Moses into his own off-screen persona to supply the needed extra-textual support of his film roles.<sup>308</sup>

Cohan in this way ascribes most of the features of Heston's star enactment in this film to the ideological demands of U.S. cold war politics, even the erotic spectacle frequently offered by shots of Heston's body in the first half of the film.

In a highly complex argument he repeatedly links this display to the demands of the film's ideology. He argues that the film "explicitly extended cold war thinking to the representation of masculinity" in that Heston's body is racially coded as white and American, in contrast to Yul Brynner/Ramese's 'foreign'

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

appearance.<sup>309</sup> But he goes on to suggest that the erotic display of Heston's body also represents the failure of that ideology to mask contradictions, as "the visual attention to their bodies ends up reproducing that unexpected yet inevitable doubling of American and alien that is the inevitable outcome of cold war representation."<sup>310</sup> This slightly contradictory argument also leaves out any discussion of the possibility or probability that the display of both stars' bodies was driven by forces other than ideology. In particular, the audience's expectations of displays of the male body that would have been aroused by both the stars and the genre. His insistence on Brynner's race being central to the representation of Rameses as the alien other also ignores the fact that in another epic Brynner could be cast uncomplicatedly as the protagonist, presumably representing American conservative ideology in the process.<sup>311</sup> His insistence on various ideological binaries being embodied in Heston and Brynner, including modern v. ancient civilisations, free v. slave states and Western v. Oriental masculinity is also undermined by Heston/Moses' Egyptian-ness for the first half of the film. But perhaps the greatest challenge to such binary readings of the film's representations is the possibility of a contradictory reading such as Alan Nadel's in which Egypt "strikingly resembles America after World War II", which would completely invert those binaries.<sup>312</sup>

Despite an apparently exclusive focus on the ideological meanings and contradictions represented by Heston/Moses, Cohan does also discuss what he sees as the defining features of Heston's star image: "The characteristics of sexual repression and moral forthrightness helped crystallise what would become the primary value of his epic star persona".<sup>313</sup> He also discusses some key features of Heston's appearance, acknowledging, for example, the erotic spectacle of Heston in the first half of the film where there are scenes that "visually center around the sight of Heston's massive, hairy chest to the point where the star is as fully fetishized by DeMille's camera as Brynner is in his semi-nude

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>310</sup> Cohan, *ibid.*, 162.

<sup>311</sup> In the film *Solomon and Sheba* (King Vidor, 1959), although he does wear a wig for the role, and in Cohan's arguments about his otherness, baldness is a key factor.

<sup>312</sup> Nadel, A. (1995) *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (London: Duke University Press), 97.

<sup>313</sup> Cohan, *Masked Men*, 155-156.

scenes”.<sup>314</sup> Cohan discusses in detail the significance of the presence of hair on Heston’s chest in contrast to his co-star’s smooth body, but his complex arguments linking this feature to Heston/Moses’s Hebrew identity and patriarchal authority fail to take into account the fact that this is a recurrent feature of Heston’s film appearances. Cohan does return to the idea, which Mourlet commented on, that Heston’s physical appearance denotes his physical and moral superiority in a fascistic way, arguing that “the size of Heston’s ‘massive’ body implies Moses’ moral stature, which in its turn indicates the racial superiority legitimating his authority.”<sup>315</sup> Despite Cohan’s desire to link this effect to “Heston’s own WASP American identity”, Mourlet’s understanding of it as resulting from his more specifically aristocratic appearance and roles seems more accurate; a broader survey of Heston’s roles reveals that this linking of physical and moral superiority is evident regardless of the race of the ‘others’ that Heston has to oppose or lead.

Mark Jancovich has considered the representations of Heston both in *El Cid* specifically, and as a film star generally, in two articles which helpfully revise some dominant features of his academic image. In particular he questions the perceived nationalistic and conservative meanings of Heston’s appearances and the way he is seen to represent the male ego ideal which have emerged from the application of these approaches to his film appearances.<sup>316</sup> Jancovich’s reading of Heston’s ideological meanings is more subtle and nuanced than Cohan’s for, whilst acknowledging the already existing ideological messages and values that they call upon, he allows for the possibility of a plurality of meanings being generated by Heston’s star enactments. Whilst accepting, for example, that *El Cid* can be read in the context of the Cold War during which “America was able to cast itself much like the film’s version of the Cid, as a universal subject able to unify the warring and divided peoples of the world and so contain a common enemy”, he also points out that “the use of these rhetorics and discourses should not . . . be taken to imply that *El Cid* was innately conservative”.<sup>317</sup> Instead he highlights how the opposition between liberalism and totalitarianism, which forms the basis of Heston/Rodrigo’s conflict

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>316</sup> Jancovich, Mark (2000) “‘The Purest Knight of All’: Nation, History and Representation in *El Cid*”, *Cinema Journal*, 40, 1, 79-103, and (2004) ‘Charlton Heston is an Axiom: Spectacle and Performance in the Development of the Blockbuster’, in A. Willis (ed.), *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 51-70.

<sup>317</sup> “‘The Purest Knight of All’”, Ibid., 94.

with the king of Spain, was “so much a part of the rhetoric of the political left, right and centre in the Cold War period” that the film’s appeal to these values does not imply a single ideological stance, but rather it makes the film available for a range of political readings.<sup>318</sup>

As has been shown, similar objections can be raised to Cohan’s binary reading by which Egypt represents the alien other in *The Ten Commandments*. Indeed, it is interesting that in all their political contextualising neither Slotkin nor Cohan consider the United States’ unequal treatment of their black population as a parallel that might affect many audiences’ reading of the film. But this is surely as likely an allegorical co-text for *The Ten Commandments*, with its focus on an enslaved people seeking freedom, as U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Indeed this is a parallel that Heston himself draws attention to in his autobiography when discussing the film’s production, mentioning how the names Moses and Aaron have “been carried by generations of black men seeking freedom.”<sup>319</sup>

Slotkin and Cohan’s ideological readings of Heston’s representation of race are also countered by other work. Justin Stringer, for example, suggests that, contra Slotkin:

The creation by international casts and crews of epics in the 1950s and 1960s reveals the Hollywood blockbuster to be an ‘allegory of anthropology’. The very production and narrative concerns of *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Khartoum* (1966) and others, prioritize issues of cross-cultural contact and understanding.<sup>320</sup>

As such production conditions and narrative concerns are also evident in *El Cid* and *55 days at Peking*, this insight suggests a radically different understanding of the racial politics and representations found in Heston’s appearance in these films is available. Alan Marcus has considered Charlton Heston and the representation of race more specifically in his essay ‘The Interracial Romance as Primal Drama: *Touch of Evil* and *Diamond Head*’.<sup>321</sup> Acknowledging Heston’s own involvement in the civil rights struggle in the U.S. in the early ’60s allows Marcus to challenge the dominant readings of Heston’s image as simply representing white conservative American values. In his revisionist approach he gives

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Heston, C. (1996) *In The Arena: The Autobiography* (London: Harper Collins), 133.

<sup>320</sup> Stringer, J. (ed.) (2003) *Movie Blockbusters* (London: Routledge), 10.

<sup>321</sup> Marcus, A. (2007) ‘The Interracial Romance as Primal Drama: *Touch of Evil* and *Diamond Head*’, *Film Studies*, 11, 14-26.



more weight than is usual to the Jewishness of Heston's heroic characters in *Ben Hur* and *The Ten Commandments*, rather than seeing them as mere metaphors for WASP American heroics. This allows him to argue that Heston's role of a Mexican detective who is framed by a corrupt American sheriff in *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958) "represents an important continuum in Heston's evolution as a character subjected to racial prejudice".<sup>322</sup> It is also interesting to note in this context Heston's role in the first two of the *Planet of the Apes* series of films, which have been described as "a liberal allegory of racial conflict".<sup>323</sup> These more carefully nuanced considerations of the relationship between Heston's roles and the representation of race thus call into question earlier simplistic conclusions about the significance of Heston's racial status to his meanings as a star figure.

### **Heston's Body/Politics**

Cohan's reading of Heston, with its focus on the features, and possible cultural meanings, of his body can be seen to have been influenced by a trend in cultural studies identified by Smith and Riley:

Since at least the mid-1990s, much attention has been focused on the human body as a cultural object and on embodiment as a crucial component or even the very ground of cultural experience.<sup>324</sup>

Mark Jancovich's focus on the significance of Heston's body in 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom' also demonstrates the interests of this kind of analysis.<sup>325</sup> In particular, he focuses on what Cohan described as Heston's "complicated relationship to his body" and argues that Heston developed various strategies to distance himself from its negative connotations, as "the classical body was a problem, a body that carried too many associations with totalitarianism".<sup>326</sup> Those negative connotations, according to Jancovich, led to a contradictory oscillation in Heston's film appearances between his body being seen as a passive erotic spectacle or as a classical actively controlled and

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>323</sup> Greene, E. (1998) *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race, Politics and Popular Culture* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press), 1.

<sup>324</sup> Smith, P. and A. Riley (2009) *Cultural Theory: An Introduction 2<sup>nd</sup> edn* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 262.

<sup>325</sup> Jancovich, M. (2004) 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom: Spectacle and Performance in the Development of the Blockbuster' in A. Willis (ed.) *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 51-70.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 64.

controlling body, bordering on the fascistic. Jancovich uses this contradiction to explain how Heston is often cast as one or other of two very different types of roles:

On the one hand, he is sometimes presented as a heroic exemplar of masculinity who becomes the object of the perverse desires of another....On the other, however, he is sometimes the subject of these perverse desires, whose body becomes the instrument of violence and cruelty.<sup>327</sup>

This insight allows Jancovich to include in his analysis those roles in which Heston plays a more ambiguous kind of hero or even a villain (including early roles such as Brad Braden, the circus manager in *The Greatest Show on Earth* and Boake Tackman, the fickle lover of Jennifer Jones in *Ruby Gentry* [King Vidor, 1952]). It is interesting to note how these types of roles are referred to much less frequently in the readings of Heston we have considered so far, possibly because they problematise the overarching conclusions such approaches seek to make about him as an 'heroic exemplar'.<sup>328</sup>

Jancovich's focus on the body also helpfully identifies a feature of Heston's star enactments that is not normally given the prominence it deserves: his voice and mode of delivery. Cohan did comment on Heston's voice and what it may symbolise in *The Ten Commandments*, but he focused on the fact that the film used Heston's own voice in the burning bush sequence for the voice of God. For Cohan this is used to signify "the divided subjectivity required of Moses before the word of God." Given that Heston's voice was distorted by being played back at a slower speed, however, the actor's 'disembodiment' would hardly have been audible to the audience in the way Cohan suggests. Far more interesting is Jancovich's description of Heston's 'theatrical' style of delivery and his discussion of how Heston's voice signals legitimacy and authority. Jancovich notices for example how Heston's role as 'good actor' in *Wayne's World 2* is as much the product of his voice and delivery, as his physical presence:

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<sup>327</sup> Jancovich, (2004) 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom', 64.

<sup>328</sup> Of his part in *Ruby Gentry* (1952) Heston tells us, "Lydia has since observed it was the first of what she calls my 'hero heels.'" C. Heston (1995) *In the Arena: The Autobiography* (London: Harper Collins), 118.

It is the sheer theatricality of his mode of delivery, in which every line is carefully presented as though it were a line of Shakespearean poetry or biblical scripture, which not only distinguishes him but further adds to his cultural legitimacy.<sup>329</sup>

Jancovich is surely correct in suggesting that “over the years, therefore, his voice has become at least as iconic as his physical image” and any delineation of the aesthetic features of Heston’s star enactments must include an awareness of the ways in which volume, tone, emphasis and timbre contribute to its significance.<sup>330</sup>

## Conclusions

Although these readings have been shown to be partial and in some cases downright wrong, the project of this chapter is not to replace these readings with new ones (although that is clearly possible and ongoing) as there is more academic work willing to read these films and Heston’s roles in them as liberal and progressive. It is this kind of reading as a practice that is rejected, not just these misreadings, to be replaced by closer focus on detailed analysis of Heston’s enactments rather than roles and messages.

The academic star image of Charlton Heston that is evident from this overview is a partial and at times a misleading one, but despite their weaknesses and heterogeneous theoretical approaches, a sense of the specificities of Heston’s enactments is discernible from this previous work, including his identification with the values of the epic genre, his embodiment of various conflicts within masculinity and patriarchy, the aesthetic demands of his beauty and tragedy and the powerful/unsettling effect his bodily display has on the viewer regardless of their sexuality/gender. Mourlet’s understanding of the centrality of pent-up anger and possible violence to Heston’s enactments is acknowledged in later writers who see him as a powerful and omnipotent figure, whether that springs from his role as the ego ideal or through his racial identification with American power and ideology. This understanding also lies behind Jancovich’s argument that Heston and his films had to disavow the potential for violence that his physical appearance promised or threatened. Mourlet’s belief that Heston’s presence constitutes a tragedy is also recognised by those psychoanalytical analyses that highlight the

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<sup>329</sup> ‘Charlton Heston is an Axiom’, *ibid.*, 61

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*

regularity with which Heston suffers injury and death in his film appearances, and both Cohan and Jancovich's application of cultural understandings of the body lead them to suggest that injury and physical punishment are the inevitable corollary to the power that Heston's appearance signifies. Writers have also noticed how Heston's roles often include having to bear the weight of representing and defending civilisation (whether this can be read as America or not). Finally, many of these analyses acknowledge the fact that Heston's beauty is often displayed as a source of visual pleasure for the viewer, although they find this a problematical feature to deal with.

This overview has also served to demonstrate why different theoretical approaches have been developed in this thesis than those employed by the various writers who have commented on Heston's film appearances previously. Most of the articles and chapters considered here were not focused on Heston's enactments as their primary area of investigation, and the analytical terms and practices they chose, therefore, were those that would best serve their overall project rather than illuminate the specific features of his appearances. It must be acknowledged, however, that this peripheral treatment has not served to promote a particularly nuanced understanding of Heston as a film star and many of the assumptions which have been made about his conservative ideological meanings have been shown to be unsustainable. Despite the apparent differences in their academic approaches, all these analyses of Heston share a set of assumptions about the star and star study, namely that its aim is to use the star to exemplify wider social or psychic structures. The major weaknesses that these analyses of Heston's star enactments have revealed are an exclusive focus on the concept of representation and an unwillingness to engage in any depth with detail of actual film performances.

While there have been many well-reasoned calls for closer attention to be paid to film performance in writing on film stars, some critics have gone further and suggested that there should also be less appeal to extra-textual evidence generally and the concept of representation in particular. Simon Watney expresses this view in a particularly forceful way when he suggests that debates over how stars signify:

Have been miserably impoverished in recent years by their dependence on ludicrously oversimplified assumptions concerning the ways in which individual actors and actresses might be said to 'represent' men and women as such.<sup>331</sup>

His use of the term oversimplification demonstrates that he has come to the same conclusion as this investigation about one of the main weaknesses of analyses which focus on representation. This is the danger of assuming that male and female characters on screen represent in an uncomplicated way real men and women in the world. Feminism, in its deconstruction of images of women, went some way to highlighting this danger and yet, as Christine Gledhill suggests, this realisation hasn't been as rigorously applied to representations of men. She asks "if, however, 'woman' is image - a fantasy - is this not true of 'man' too?"<sup>332</sup> Leon Hunt was perhaps hinting at this possibility in his suggestion that Heston in *El Cid* offers a kind of 'gender tour' of masculinity even for men, when he asks:

Can masculinity be taken to be 'known' in an essentially heroic genre which nevertheless explores it as something which, in its highest form, becomes exotic, uncanny, impossible?<sup>333</sup>

Gledhill criticises the concept of representation, therefore, for eliding the aesthetic intervention film makes in the process of producing those very representations because it "precipitately refers the work and its reception to a reality constituted and theoretically known outside the work," and she argues that analyses should pay more attention to the aesthetic requirements of films as this "suggests a gap between imaginative and representational functions, which should delay the immediate translation of the one in terms of the other".<sup>334</sup>

Such an elision closes off and denies the audience's pleasurable interaction with such aesthetic forms in favour of immediate ideological interpretation and analysis. Leon Hunt's acknowledgement that he always finds the end of *El Cid* very moving, for example, is immediately followed by the caveat, "its ideological investments notwithstanding".<sup>335</sup> Whilst Gledhill's rejection of this elision is inspired by a

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<sup>331</sup> Watney, S. (1985) 'Katharine Hepburn and the Cinema of Chastisement', *Screen*, 26, 5, 55.

<sup>332</sup> Gledhill, C. (1995) 'Women Reading Men' in P. Kirkham and J. Thumin (eds) (1995) *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women* (London: Lawrence and Wishart), 74.

<sup>333</sup> Hunt, 'What are Big Boys Made of?', 82.

<sup>334</sup> Gledhill, 'Women Reading Men', 75

<sup>335</sup> Hunt 'What Are Big Boys Made Of?', 81.

feminist desire to account for female pleasure in film viewing, her approach also opens a space to account for non-gender-specific pleasures which would also overcome the essentialist fallacy of always describing the eroticisation of the male figure as 'homo' erotic. Most of the readings of Heston's star enactments that we have so far encountered fit Gledhill's description of readings which "deconstruct in a demand that [it] be accountable to analytical paradigms of the social formation or patriarchal psyche."<sup>336</sup> The kind of reading she proposes to replace this with, "attempt[s] to work with the aesthetic dynamic and pleasures offered by a film", as one effect of this forestalling is the opening of a space in which aesthetics and emotions can be considered.<sup>337</sup> This change in focus to a more aesthetic approach when analysing stars has also been proposed by Christine Geraghty, as was discussed in Chapter Two, when she argues that "it is the audience's understanding of the specifically cinematic pleasures of genre and performance which need to be foregrounded".<sup>338</sup>

The approaches adopted in the rest of this investigation into the star enactments of Charlton Heston have been selected in order to fulfil Gledhill's requirements to both foreground the specifically cinematic pleasures of his enactments and to attempt to work with the aesthetic dynamic and pleasures they offer. The next chapter engages with the questions of how to approach, read and write about star enactments if one is not to 'precipitately refer the work and its reception to a reality outside the work' as Gledhill puts it.<sup>339</sup> This is where those aesthetic and phenomenological approaches discussed in Chapter Two will be applied to a specific aesthetic question about Heston's star enactments, and the benefits of an ekphrastic style of writing for engaging with such questions will be demonstrated. This closer focus will allow for a further and more specific delineation of the Heston aesthetic to be drawn, which can then be used as a baseline for the comparative categories called upon in later chapters to further investigate the star enactments of Charlton Heston.

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<sup>336</sup> Gledhill, *ibid.*, 91.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>338</sup> Geraghty, C. (2000) 'Re-examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance' in C. Gledhill and L. Williams (eds) *Reinventing Film Studies* (London: Hodder Arnold), 195.

<sup>339</sup> Gledhill, 'Women Reading Men', 75

## Four The Agony and the Ecstasy: Defining the Heston Aesthetic

### What is the Heston Aesthetic?

Investigating Heston's academic star image and how it has been constructed allows for the beginning of a delineation of what will be called, after Mourlet, the Heston 'aesthetic'. Rather than being interested in identifying Heston's 'image', the term Dyer introduced to describe the star's embodiment of ideological attitudes and ideas which is made up equally of publicity, promotion, film appearance and criticism/commentary, this delineation of an 'aesthetic' will focus as much on the formal and filmic properties of Heston's star enactments.<sup>340</sup> It is this that will be used to replace existing representational and ideological readings of the Heston star 'image' in the rest of the investigation with an understanding alert and alive to the recurrent aesthetic features of his star enactments.

Although the Heston aesthetic includes within it aspects of what Dyer would have designated as his star image, it is not defined through a consideration of the star in relation to representations or ideological messages. It also differs from the star image in so far as it is more closely based on evidence from Heston's film appearances and their formal properties than other, extra-filmic, discourses. That a Heston aesthetic is discernible is evident, according to Mourlet, when he suggests that Heston's appearances in films offer something that even the worst of directors cannot degrade, and Dyer seems to accept that this is the case when he states that "Heston 'means' Heston regardless of what the film is trying to do with him".<sup>341</sup> One of the purposes of the overview in the previous chapter was to begin to isolate the features that may be said to form the Heston aesthetic through engaging with previous readings. Certain recurrent features of form and style have emerged: the specularisation of Heston's body; the emphasis on his superior height and build; the centrality of action and violence to his roles; the authority of his voice and delivery of lines; the highlighting of his blue eyes and prominent profile in close shots. These aesthetic features are more objectively demonstrable through film analysis

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<sup>340</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 60-63.

<sup>341</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 131.

than the 'interpretations' or readings which have been evident in this investigation so far, and their significance can and will differ depending on the film, role and genre in which Heston appears.

### **The Seductive Object of Our Interest**

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's suggestion that "obsessions are the most durable form of intellectual capital" and Barthes' more ambiguous assertion that "you study what you desire, or what you fear," offer on the one hand encouragement and on the other, a more ambiguous acceptance of the advisability of the scholar's personal interest forming the basis of their study.<sup>342</sup> Film theoreticians are traditionally wary of focusing explicitly on their own 'obsession, desire or fear', especially in relation to film stars, and the application of a theoretical framework is often presented as a necessary corrective to such a subjective approach. Indeed the drive to apply such theoretical approaches in itself could be explained as a response to the critical anxiety generated by issues of pleasure and emotion so closely associated with star enactments. The promise of theory in contrast to such subjective areas, as Carole Zucker noted, is that it is "both safe and 'correct'; it declares a kind of scientific objectivity in relation to the subject, and authorizes a comfortable distance from the potentially volatile emotional material of performance".<sup>343</sup> Stanley Cavell, however, suggests that this neutrality may be illusory and, far from being safe and neutral, theory itself can become an entrancing and seductive object for the scholar. In this way theory can be seen to merely *replace* film as the seductive object of our interest rather than protect one from any such seduction.<sup>344</sup>

One contributory reason for the avoidance, and even disavowal, of one's own investment in the object of study may be that "the fear of admitting to an intensely felt emotion . . . is gendered. [It] threatens masculine [and academic] codes of emotional repression".<sup>345</sup> In the light of this comment it is not surprising that scholars have sought to justify any such personal engagement with their subject. One

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<sup>342</sup> Sedgwick, E.K. (1985) *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press), ix. Barthes' comment is quoted in S. Heath (1987) 'Male Feminism' in A. Jardine and P. Smith (eds) *Men in Feminism* (London: Methuen), 6.

<sup>343</sup> Zucker, C. (1993) 'Introduction: Film Acting', *Postscript*, 12, 2, 4.

<sup>344</sup> "He argues in *Pursuits of Happiness* that theory itself can be entrancing, seductive; that theory, uncritically employed, merely replaces the seductive object of our interest, film." M. Keane (1993) 'Dyer Straits: Theoretical Issues in Studies of Film Acting' *Postscript*, 12, 2, 33.

<sup>345</sup> Jacobowitz, F. (1990) 'Critical Realism: Subversive Commercial Art', *CineACTION!*, 3, 10, 6.



acceptable defence for the scholar interested in investigating their own obsessions has been an appeal to personal identity. Those who identify themselves as existing to one side of masculine codes, such as female and gay scholars, have thus been more able and willing to admit to and discuss their personal investment in their objects of study. Such declarations are still usually qualified, however, with some acknowledgement of the danger of the untheoretical nature of such an interest, as can be seen in Gledhill's comment when she declares "I am seeking a way of thinking about [my object of study] that will acknowledge its pleasures and meanings *without losing a critical edge*" (my italics).<sup>346</sup> Despite the academically objective reasons given in Chapter Three for focusing on the star enactments of Charlton Heston, therefore, this work also intends to embrace my obsession, without excuse or apology.

Cavell goes one stage further than merely embracing, however, when he suggests that one should "let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it," thus advocating not only accepting one's personal involvement with the object of study, but acknowledging this by allowing it primacy in methodological decisions.<sup>347</sup> Such an approach is both simple and radical, as it allows for a rejection of the kind of theoretical 'assumptions' that are often felt necessary by critics before they engage in analysis. Such an approach is exemplified by Dyer's assertion that "semiotic analysis has to make assumptions about how texts work before proceeding to analyse them".<sup>348</sup> Cavell's method, on the contrary, demands an open-mindedness towards the object of study and a refusal to make premature assumptions about the material. It also demands an inversion of the usual order of critical investigation, in which the choice of method or theory precedes the choice of subject matter. This often results in the object of study being demoted to the category of explicatory material rather than primary focus. As was explained in Chapter Two, Cavell's dictum will be allowed to inform the investigation undertaken in this thesis. In practice this will mean the avoidance of imposing an understanding of how texts work, and what they can reveal, on to the object of study and replacing this with an unprejudiced and detailed unpacking of what the object of study consists of. Only once the object has been considered in this

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<sup>346</sup> Gledhill, C. (1995) 'Women Reading Men' in P. Kirkham and J. Thumin (eds) (1995) *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women* (London: Lawrence and Wishart), 73.

<sup>347</sup> Cavell, S. (1981) *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 10.

<sup>348</sup> Dyer, R. (1979) *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing), 1.

way have critical approaches been selected. This approach should, therefore, result in an application of those methods which offer to reveal most about the object of study, and it also offers the opportunity to evaluate the usefulness of inverting the more common order in which approach and object are selected in film studies.

As the textual materials at the heart of this study are the star enactments of Charlton Heston, it may be useful, at times, to discuss the separable components of those enactments. Each component may demand different methods to delineate and this will allow for detailed and specific description and analysis. Although the different elements identified in the Star Enactment Analysis Framework have been touched on at various times by other scholars, many of them are still not ontologically stable and, even when established as categories for analysis, their boundaries relentlessly merge into one another. It is well established, for example, how the body of the star also carries signs of their persona, but the film character embodied by the star is similarly inflected, for “character and performer are inextricably linked; they coalesce.”<sup>349</sup> The kind of ontological questions Wojcik poses in trying to excavate the category she calls film acting, such as “to what degree is film acting a function of what an actor does... and to what degree is it technologically determined?” should remind us how bound together *mise-en-scène* and *mise-en-shot* are with performance.<sup>350</sup> Not only is it difficult to analyse these categories separately, it is also unlikely to prove fruitful, as V.F. Perkins makes clear in his reading of a sequence from *Caught* (1949, Max Ophuls):

No neat distinction can be drawn between the meanings that [the character] Leonora offers to Smith Ohlrig, that [the star] Barbara Bel Geddes offers to the camera and that the film offers to the audience. An appreciation of the sequence should encompass all three.<sup>351</sup>

It is this interplay between categories of performer, performance and character, rather than the distinctions between them, which will require careful consideration in the development of analytical methods capable of focusing on the star enactment. Being alert to this interplay is particularly important

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<sup>349</sup> Klevan, A. (2005) *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation* (London: Wallflower Press), 4.

<sup>350</sup> Robertson Wojcik, P. (ed.) (2004) ‘General Introduction’ in *Movie Acting: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge), 9.

<sup>351</sup> Perkins V.F. (1990) ‘Must We Say What They Mean? Film Criticism and Interpretation’, *Movie*, 34/35, 1-2.

because, as Murray Smith has noted, “of all the techniques which contribute to character subjectivity, performance style has had the least attention paid to it”.<sup>352</sup> But he does go on to assert that “the function of performance has remained constant in classical cinema: the revelation of the interior states of characters.”

It will also be necessary to bear in mind the temporal nature of star enactments, which are, as Higson finds, “caught up in a polysemic production of meaning and pleasure, crucially dependent on the moment of viewing”.<sup>353</sup> I will return to this crucial aspect of the temporality of the star enactment later in this discussion but, whilst evaluating possible methodological approaches, it is worth noting the attendant temporal problem noted by Paul McDonald:

Film duration introduces a paradox into acting analysis: while slowing or halting the film frame may be necessary to precisely determine performance details...by modifying time, the connotations of any moment may become radically altered.<sup>354</sup>

Star enactments, however, are not all that will be investigated in this study. One of the more complex aspects of this investigation is, more specifically, the beauty and pleasure generated by those enactments which Higson's point reminds us of. We will need to find ways to engage with not only the emotional but also the aesthetic features of the star enactment. These are at once more specific and more nebulous objects of study and ones that have been either dismissed or denounced for their very untheorisable basis, as they are features that can appear both self-indulgent and resistant to analysis. Cavell's comments about the seductive nature of theory remind us, however, that every critic is in thrall to some object. In order to locate and comment on pleasure and beauty, detailed reference to actual star enactments will be necessary, but the form such references should take will also need to be taught to us by the object of study.

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<sup>352</sup> Smith, M. (1995) *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 151.

<sup>353</sup> Higson, A. (2004) 'Film Acting and Independent Cinema' in P. Robertson Wojcik (ed.) *Movie Acting: A Film Reader* (London: Routledge), 146.

<sup>354</sup> McDonald, P. (2004) 'Why Study Film Acting? Some Opening Reflections' in C. Baron, D. Carson and F.P. Tomasulo (eds.) *More than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 23-41.

## Response/Reading/Interpretation/Appreciation/Ekphrasis

In undertaking detailed description and analysis of star enactments the reasons behind much of academic film writing's reluctance to engage with the detail of film performances come into focus. Although critics often cite the alleged difficulty of describing star enactments to explain such neglect, it may be due more to a theoretical distrust of such an approach than any problems inherent within it. As Stern and Kouvaros have argued: "post-1970s theory entailed a decided rejection of the descriptive (conceived of as always duplicitous, subjective, rhetorical, misleadingly mimetic)".<sup>355</sup> But this rejection of description entailed, by extension, a similar rejection of any consideration of response and emotion. McDonald's comment reminds us that, in the past, the 'significance of emotion' in film studies has been avoided or overlooked:

If the study of film acting develops further it may have a deeper conceptual influence on the intellectual agenda of film studies by encouraging attention to the significance of emotion when assessing the impact of the movies.<sup>356</sup>

It is interesting to note at this point, therefore, that the discomfort generated by the enthusiasm in Michel Mourlet's response to Heston, while being specifically generated, as has been suggested, by subconscious homophobia, can also be explained more generally by its unashamed references to the emotion of pleasure. Jim Hillier has commented on how the enthusiasm in Mourlet's writing allows it to engage with this key but neglected phenomenon:

It is worth recognising that some of the 'excess' associated with Mourlet's writing . . . may be valued in helping to raise questions rarely raised in critical writing at this time or since, questions relating to visual pleasure.<sup>357</sup>

Detailed description of star enactments would seem to demand an acknowledgement of emotion generally and pleasure specifically; areas that whilst key to an understanding of both film and star have

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<sup>355</sup> Stern, L. and G. Kouvaros (eds.) (1999) *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* (Power Publications: Sydney), 8.

<sup>356</sup> McDonald, P. (2004) 'Why Study Film Acting? Some Opening Reflections' in C. Baron, D. Carson and F.P. Tomasulo (eds) *More than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 23-41.

<sup>357</sup> Hillier, J. (ed.) (1986) *Cahiers du Cinema: 1960-1968: New Wave, New Cinema, Re-Evaluating Hollywood Volume 2* (London: Routledge), 118.

been neglected in film studies. A methodological approach that allows for such an acknowledgement is most likely to be found in one that encourages close focus on the detail of film sequences. As the subtitle of this section acknowledges, such practice has been undertaken using a range of different terms, with different justifications and aims. The chapter will therefore investigate each method in turn in order to justify their selection in the chapters that follow.

### **Reading v. Interpretation**

As has already been mentioned, one currently acceptable reason for considering one's own pleasurable response as the starting point for analysis has been offered by certain feminist approaches. A good example of the way such an approach is justified is found in Christine Gledhill's essay 'Women Reading Men', where she states that "the modest ambition of this piece is to put the question of 'women reading men' on the agenda, using my own responses as a starting point".<sup>358</sup> Although this is a worthy and illuminating aim, Gledhill seems to suggest that such personal readings can only have value if they are produced by certain oppressed groups. She does not, therefore, justify such an approach for all film scholars. Gledhill's description of what is implied by her and others' use of the term 'reading' also alerts us to its focus on the post-filmic experience of the viewer. As she explains:

I use the term 'reading' as itself a 'secondary elaboration' of a diffuse and multiple experience which includes looking, emotional and visceral response, fantasising, as well as reflection and reminiscence.<sup>359</sup>

Reading in this sense, therefore, is as much a record of the viewer's response as an insight into the film text, as she herself acknowledges:

If readings are determined by the social and subjective formation of the reader, then the readings themselves tell us less about the text, than what for a group of readers the text makes possible.<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Gledhill, 'Women Reading Men', 78.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

This understanding of 'reading', therefore, does not suggest such a practice can be a useful intervention in a debate over a film or a star's significance, and it is not therefore a useful methodological tool for this investigation.

Inherent within the practice of 'interpretation', however, is the question of the wider critical status of one's conclusions, a question neatly sidestepped by the more personalised practice of 'reading'. It is interesting then, that Marian Keane chooses the term interpretation, rather than reading, for the practice she feels should be encouraged in the investigation of film acting. A practice that she also argues should include detailed description of film moments:

The evidence that one can call upon in putting forth one's understanding of particular performances includes the films themselves (accurate description); it also includes one's interpretation of those moments, gestures, glances, movements.<sup>361</sup>

The reference to accurate description suggests that this approach can appeal to objective evidence in a way a reading cannot and, although Keane stresses that "such interpretations are infinitely contestable", she does not see this as meaning they inevitably have no status within scholarly discourse; on the contrary, she argues calling for interpretation is:

Encouraging critics to express the complexity of interpretation within their own thinking by setting themselves to the intellectual task of seeing their interpretations as just that: interpretations, hence as calling for other interpretations.<sup>362</sup>

Clearly interpretation is more suited to the purposes of this investigation, and offers a more explicit intervention into critical discourse around star enactments. This remains the case whether one accepts that all interpretations are contestable or not, as this is surely true of all academic writing, however apparently objective.

Although Keane's call for more interpretative practice within star study envisions the form such work should take she doesn't give an example of this herself; for that, it is useful to consider V. F. Perkin's article 'Must We Say What They Mean?', which has been described as an example of writing which

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<sup>361</sup> Keane, M. (1993) 'Dyer Straits: Theoretical Issues in Studies of Film Acting', *Postscript*, 12, 2, 31.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

manages “to describe and interpret performance sensitively”.<sup>363</sup> As Perkins is interested in both defending and exploring film interpretation as a method, his article provides a judicious insight into the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. His interpretation begins by describing the film sequence under analysis in detail (500 words to describe and comment on 15 seconds of film), a description he characterises as “far from exhaustive but I believe that it is accurate and illuminating”.<sup>364</sup> But he goes on to say, “in order to describe (the actor/character’s) gestures I have had to interpret them”.<sup>365</sup> Here it can be seen that Perkins is well aware that the act of description, however accurate, is always at the same time an act of interpretation. Unlike Keane, however, Perkins does not emphasise the contestability of his interpretations; on the contrary, he is willing to make quite large claims for them, stating: “I have written about things that I believe to be in the film for all to see, and to see the sense of”.<sup>366</sup> It is this sense of persuasiveness, as well as the focus on detailed description, that differentiates interpretation from reading for, as Keane herself acknowledges, “to share a judgement of taste, an aesthetic judgement, about a film performance, others have to come to see a gesture or glance or to hear the inflection of a phrase the way you do”.<sup>367</sup> The concomitant difficulties Perkins identifies with this method are, therefore, rhetorical rather than methodological ones:

Hazards are presented by the relationship between the understanding of a film manifested in our response and enjoyment and the understanding that is expressed in an articulated appreciation.<sup>368</sup>

He describes this as “a problem with oneself, of finding the words that fit one’s sense of the moment or the movie”.<sup>369</sup> Even more explicitly, for the purposes of this investigation, Keane makes clear that we cannot accurately describe the object of study without “finding words for the *beauty* and *pleasure* of films – words that provide their own pleasure of doing justice to our experience of beauty and

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<sup>363</sup> Gibbs, J. (2002) *Mise-en-Scène: Film Style and Interpretation* (Wallflower Press: London), 12.

<sup>364</sup> Perkins, ‘Must We Say What They Mean?’, 1.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>367</sup> Keane, ‘Dyer Straits’, 31.

<sup>368</sup> Perkins, ‘Must We Say What They Mean?’, 4.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*

pleasure" (my italics).<sup>370</sup> This perceived difficulty with 'finding the right words' would suggest that interpretation as an approach suffers from a rhetorical, rather than a methodological weakness.

This rhetorical problem with interpretation within films studies has been more recently identified and addressed by Stern and Kouvaros in their book *Falling For You*.<sup>371</sup> In their introduction to this selection of essays on film performance they identify a lack of models for such practice, asking "where are the models for understanding the ways in which human bodies are moved within the cinematic frame, the ways in which these bodily motions may move viewers?"<sup>372</sup> Their proposal of a turn towards *ekphrastic* writing, a mode more commonly found in the visual arts, offers a solution to the rhetorical problem identified by Keane and Perkins within interpretive writing.<sup>373</sup> For Stern and Kouvaros this ekphrastic mode seems to offer a way of both interpreting and rendering present to the reader the object being interpreted:

We would like to write in such a way as to bring the film into imaginative being for the reader....But we would also like to offer a persuasive interpretation based on attentiveness to the object, on detailed and accurate rendition.<sup>374</sup>

What is particularly useful about Stern and Kouvaros' approach is that they identify, in a way Keane and Perkins did not, the problem of describing film when it is a moving, not static, medium. For Keane and Perkins, accurate description consists of an unproblematic rendering of the film into written language, but this underplays a key feature of film, as Stern and Kouvaros emphasise:

Film is and is not a physical object. It can be retrieved, it possesses a stability that should be amenable to reproduction and fairly accurate description. AND YET, it passes before our eyes, the actors move... film moves, it is ephemeral.<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> Keane, 'Dyer Straits', 32.

<sup>371</sup> Stern, L. and G. Kouvaros (eds) (1999) *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* (Sydney: Power Publications).

<sup>372</sup> Stern, L and G. Kouvaros, *Falling for You*, 9.

<sup>373</sup> "In Literature the skill of describing works of art goes under the name of a rhetorical trope: Ekphrasis." Ibid., 10.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 19.



As has already been highlighted, this is a serious methodological issue, especially when discussing star enactments. The ability to reproduce film frames to illustrate description and analysis would appear to offer the film scholar stable and objective evidence for their interpretation, and yet often the still frame image does not reproduce the precise expression or gesture that has struck the writer. Or the film still, out of the context of its surrounding frames, fails to reproduce the power of that moment within the timescale of the unfolding narrative. Often such ephemeral moments can only be satisfyingly conjured up through just the sort of ekphrastic writing suggested by Stern and Kouvaros.<sup>376</sup> There is a moment in *The Big Country* (William Wyler, 1958), for example, in which the ranch overseer Steve Leech (played by Charlton Heston) watches as his fellow employees terrorize the homestead of a rival cattleman. His moral discomfort is conveyed by a subtle range of movements and facial expressions that could not be captured in a single frame and whose cumulative effect is a key feature of their effect. He raises himself tall and upright in his saddle in anticipation of preventing the cowardly behaviour of the men and he then turns swiftly with an accusing glare at his boss when he is refused permission to intervene. He is forced to look down and then away in frustration when this glare is returned by his more powerful employer. His body previously poised for action now slouches and shifts uncomfortably as he struggles with his desire to do the right thing and his loyalty to his employer. A muscle twitches in his cheek as he swallows the words he wants to say.

Ekphrastic writing, according to Stern and Kouvaros, is more than just a descriptive or interpretive mode; it is an attempt to bring the film alive. This descriptive/ekphrastic mode of writing therefore also offers the opportunity to acknowledge the admittedly problematic corporeal presence of the star in the analysis of star enactments, a presence which is often denied in more theoretically imbricated approaches. Keane argues against such a denial, however:

One issue I am unwilling to take for granted or to accept as explicable (in the sense of explained away) by theory in advance of criticism is the status of the film performer's physical reality in relation to his or her film projection. It is a crucial issue to the study of film acting.<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Although I do use frame enlargements myself in Chapter Four.

<sup>377</sup> Keane, 'Dyer Straits', 36.

Stern and Kouvaros suggest an ekphrastic approach to film writing “might perform a magical transformation . . . a rhetorical refiguring of particular forms of corporeal presence”.<sup>378</sup> Thus it would seem that an ekphrastic mode of writing offers the most promising approach for rendering and acknowledging the beauty and pleasure of star enactments. It offers a way of acknowledging the unique specificities of star enactments, both their temporality and what Klevan calls their ontological particularity, which is that “a living human being embodies a film character”.<sup>379</sup> The way this ekphrastic mode of writing has been selected also seems to justify Stanley Cavell’s dictum, cited earlier in the chapter, that one should let the object of your interest teach you how to study it.

### **From Aesthetics to Appreciation**

But there is another aspect to this form of writing that perhaps should be made more explicit; the element of appreciation which seems to be inherent within it. What links all the critics I have discussed in this subsection is that their choice of object of study can be seen to be driven by personal engagement and fascination, rather than by the demands of an externally imposed thesis. Of all the unwelcome approaches to textual analysis nothing could exceed the practice of *appreciation* for critical censure. It carries within it implications of guilty collaboration with the ideological project of film texts and a lack of objective rigour, and yet the word crops up regularly in the kinds of writing being considered as models in this chapter; indeed the title of one of the works cited, *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation*, makes this tendency explicit.<sup>380</sup> Those less willing to openly admit to an act of appreciation have perhaps found a more neutral term, that often amounts to the same thing, in discussing films in terms of their aesthetics. Thus Gledhill defends her aim to produce “readings which attempt to work with the aesthetic dynamic and pleasures offered by a film.”<sup>381</sup> Ekphrastic writing therefore also suits the purposes of this investigation because attempting to render the experience of the film moment for the reader will inevitably expose the writer’s own pleasurable engagement with the film.

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<sup>378</sup> Stern and Kouvaros, *Falling for You*, 14.

<sup>379</sup> Klevan, A. (2002) *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation* (London and New York: Wallflower Press), 7.

<sup>380</sup> Klevan, A. *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation*, *ibid.*

<sup>381</sup> Gledhill, ‘Women Reading Men’, 91.

## Heston and Ekphrasis: An Application

In order to demonstrate the benefits of an ekphrastic rendering of film sequences in investigating star enactments it will be illuminating to first discuss a different kind of reading as a contrast. A good example of an ideologically and extra-textually determined reading of a star enactment is found in Mark Jancovich's essay 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom'.<sup>382</sup> The ideological reading Jancovich proposes is that

Heston is at his best in roles where the powerful public persona of his character comes into conflict with his private desires, where his performance registers the tension of maintaining the masculine public self.<sup>383</sup>

This reading exemplifies the inadequacies identified by this chapter in such approaches in so far as it "precipitately refer[s] the work . . . to a reality constituted and theoretically known outside the work," in this case ideas about masculinity and its construction, rather than engaging with the aesthetic dynamic of the work itself. Although it must be granted that it would have been hard for such an engagement to have been achieved, given that Jancovich is willing to make a judgement about all of Heston's star enactments without describing any examples in detail. The evidence that Jancovich does appeal to in support of his reading - Heston's autobiography and a popular biography - are not more likely to instil confidence in the academic critic, given their lack of objectivity and critical apparatus.

Jancovich's conclusions about Heston's enactments are supported instead by his description of Heston's acting style. As Heston focuses on the external details of his characters, for Jancovich this means he inevitably has difficulty conveying the private and emotional lives of his characters. It is worth investigating, therefore, the evidence on which he bases this characterisation of Heston's acting style. Jancovich supplies a quotation from Heston's autobiography to support his assertion that Heston is less successful at portraying private emotion: "many actors insist that they must find the *inside* of the man first, and work outwards....I wouldn't know where to reach for the inside if I had no outside to

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<sup>382</sup> Jancovich, M. 2004 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom: Spectacle and Performance in the Development of the Blockbuster' in A. Wills (ed.) *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 51-70.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 66.

begin with" [*italics in original*].<sup>384</sup> But the context of the quote makes it clear that Heston here is discussing his *preparation for* rather than *performance of* a role, and that his use of external detail is a tool he uses to then reach the internal aspects of a character. It is true that Heston distanced himself from 'method' acting, and the preparation techniques he describes here correspond in contrast to what has been labelled 'technique' acting, but neither style has a monopoly on being able to convey interiority more convincingly.<sup>385</sup> Indeed, as Cynthia Baron points out, technique acting is "not necessarily a recipe for conventional performances. Instead [it] represents a definable position in a long history of debates within the acting profession".<sup>386</sup> If Jancovich could be said to be commenting on performance at all, then he appears to be endorsing a culturally determined evaluation of performances which see this 'technique' style as somehow less 'authentic'.

Jancovich becomes more specific about Heston's 'weaknesses' as an actor, however, when he describes him as appearing "profoundly uncomfortable with scenes of intimacy, particularly love scenes".<sup>387</sup> He suggests this is symptomatic of "a more general antipathy towards women" which he argues is part of the character of Charlton Heston. It is hard to know where to begin to engage with such an analysis. The argument seems to be that because Heston, as a person, is profoundly uncomfortable both with displaying emotion and in the company of women, this is what is always conveyed by him on screen, regardless of specific details of his performance, film role, director or genre. The evidence for these 'facts' about the character of Charlton Heston, the person, is found in (auto)biographical writing. It is not surprising that Jancovich is untroubled by using only the name Heston when describing his enactment of a film role, although the convention for some time has been to signal one's awareness of the presence of both actor and character through the use of a slash between both names, as his comments suggest that what we are watching in *El Cid* (Anthony Mann, 1961) and other films is merely the person, Charlton Heston, in awkward situations: "In *El Cid*, however and in a number of other performances, Heston's own problems with the private are used

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>385</sup> "Every actor trained since when the Moscow Art Theatre came over has been exposed to what they call 'the method', and I've been through that. It's a lot of fun, but it doesn't accomplish a great deal." Charlton Heston's commentary on *Ben Hur* DVD, Chapter 16, from 53:34.

<sup>386</sup> Baron, C. (1999) 'Crafting Film Performances: Acting on the Hollywood Studio Era' in A. Lovell and P. Kramer (eds) *Screen Acting* (London: Routledge), 43.

<sup>387</sup> Jancovich (2004) 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom', 66.

productively.”<sup>388</sup> It is hard to see therefore where Jancovich allows for Heston’s performance to register the ‘tension of maintaining the masculine public self’ as his argument allows for no distance to exist at all between the person of Charlton Heston and the character of Rodrigo/El Cid.

### **From Pleasure/Fascination to Significance/Mattering**

The question may well be posed, however, that if the investigation of star enactments isn’t going to be forestalled at a discussion of representation, what other conclusions may it lead to? It has long been acknowledged that “attention to mise-en-scène gives criticism a way of accounting for the text as pleasurable, pointing to its fascination as well as its meaning”.<sup>389</sup> Acknowledging fascination and accounting for pleasure are important acts given their former status in film studies, but might there also be more obviously useful points to be made from the findings? Perkins suggests that “an important test of its validity and usefulness will be the degree to which we can internalise it and use it to enrich our contact with the film.”<sup>390</sup> Although ‘enrich’ may be a dangerously vague term, it does emphasise both the appreciative features of this approach and the focus it places on the film rather than external truths/theories, be they ideological or psychoanalytical.<sup>391</sup> Stanley Cavell defines the work of film criticism as being “to express [the] appearances [of objects, people and locales] on film, and define those significances, and articulate the nature of this mattering.”<sup>392</sup> Rather than close down the possible significance of what is fascinating and pleasurable in Charlton Heston’s star enactments, therefore, what follows is an ekphrastic rendering of his enactment in one love scene from *El Cid*, using the precise categories offered by the star enactment analysis framework.

The first task then must be to see if an ekphrastic rendering can present a more subtle and detailed account of the specificities of enactment than ‘representational’ accounts generally and Jancovich’s reading specifically. If Jancovich’s characterisation of Heston’s performances in love scenes as ‘profoundly uncomfortable’ is both overgeneralised and unsupported, my reading will focus on Heston’s

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 66

<sup>389</sup> Caughie, J. (ed.) (1981) *Theories of Authorship* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 13.

<sup>390</sup> Perkins, ‘Must We Say What They Mean?’, 6.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 205.

star enactment in one specific 'love scene' in *El Cid* and try to present a more detailed and convincing interpretation. It may be necessary, however, to be slightly more specific about the term 'love scene' which is used unproblematically by Jancovich. He seems to be using it as a common-sense term, rather than a theoretically delineated category, and although it appears readily understandable, like many such terms it may be too vague to be used productively in academic analysis. The blanket category of 'love scene' fails to allow, for example, for the very significant differences that genre demands and conventions will have on such scenes across a range of films. It is reasonable to assume from the context, however, that Jancovich uses the term to categorise scenes in which Heston plays opposite a female actor, which are about (romantic/erotic) love and/or contain actions and gestures signifying the existence of such love between the two characters. Such actions in mainstream Hollywood films can vary from mere looks exchanged between characters, through the slightest of physical contact to scenes of simulated sex (though not in early 1960s Hollywood when *El Cid* was produced and the production code was still in place).

The scene I have chosen to focus on, in order to investigate in detail Heston's enactment in a love scene, occurs near the beginning of *El Cid*. It takes place in a room in the King's castle and opens with Heston/Rodrigo alone. He is joined very soon by the woman he is in love with and engaged to marry: Chimene, played by Sophia Loren. This scene is the first time the audience see Heston/Rodrigo and Loren/Chimene together (and the first time we see Loren/Chimene at all). Analysing this meeting scene in isolation, however, would not only be misleading but impossible. As one would expect with a classical Hollywood narrative, all the events and motivating factors in the protagonist's character are skilfully bound together. Rodrigo's love for Chimene has already been established as a key element in both his characterisation and the plot in the film's opening scene. In this scene Rodrigo's noble actions in freeing Moorish prisoners are shown to be motivated by his love for Chimene rather than other warrior codes one may expect of a medieval knight. The ennobling nature of his love is thus established as a key theme, which is elaborated on in the scene which follows. Although the main purpose of the love scene is to introduce us to, and convince us of, the love that exists between Rodrigo and Chimene, the film's main plot continues to move forward during it as well, as one of the results of Rodrigo's act of mercy is that he is now being publicly accused of treachery in front of the king. This interlinking of love plot and action plot is achieved in two ways: visually, there is cutting between the room in which the lovers meet and the royal hall below, and aurally, the noise of the

political debate frequently interrupts their meeting. That this accusation of treachery will shortly lead to Rodrigo killing Chimene's father and their subsequent bitter estrangement, alerts us to the fact that this scene, although nominally a love scene, plays a vital role in furthering all aspects of the plot and creates an undertone of dramatic irony.

### **His Most Profound Weakness as an Actor...**

Having placed the scene in some sort of narrative context we should be more confident in asking one question of it: how, if not 'profoundly uncomfortable', does Heston/Rodrigo appear during it? In order to do so, we will need to accept, as V.F. Perkins asserts, that "films like this are made on the premise that audiences can see the implications of the acts, words and silences of movie characters".<sup>393</sup> Heston's appearance in this scene already conveys meanings and creates expectations through those aspects of mise-en-scène which James Naremore designates as *accessories*: costume, props and hair.<sup>394</sup> Heston/Rodrigo is dressed in various shades of brown, the floor-length cloak he wears is also slung around his neck. He wears boots, tight dark brown leggings, and a short lighter brown tunic that appears to be made out of leather. There are dull metal rivets around the shoulders of the tunic and a wide leather belt with three buckles is fastened around his waist; similarly buckled gauntlets are around each wrist. This costume can be seen to serve two purposes: it establishes aspects of Rodrigo's character within the diegesis, and it also brings into circulation the appeal of the star. In terms of characterisation, he is not dressed in an elaborate or colourful costume, unlike the other knights we have already seen at the king's court, and he thus appears more simple and honest in contrast to their sophistication. In terms of narrative, Rodrigo's practical costume reminds us that he has only just arrived back at court, which emphasises the speed with which the plot is developing. But beyond the diegetic demands of narrative and characterisation, this costume also allows for the display of Heston/Rodrigo's heroic body in various ways. The short tunic reveals his muscular legs in tight leggings and the wide belt around his waist (not unlike those worn by weightlifters) emphasises the breadth of his chest and shoulders. The width of his shoulders is further enhanced by the cloak that is

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<sup>393</sup> Perkins, 'Must We Say What They Mean?', 1.

<sup>394</sup> "My remarks on this theme are grouped under the vague rubric of 'accessories'", J. Naremore (1988) *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 83.

slung round them and the metal studs that decorate the tunic around them. His costume is also hypermasculine, being made of leather which is decorated with various metal studs and buckles.

Despite the appeal to historical accuracy, or at least probability, which exists in his costume, however, Heston/Rodrigo's hairstyle is resolutely contemporary with the date of the film's production. One can see the shine of hair oil where it has been swept back at the sides and the way it is arranged at the front can only accurately be described as a 'quiff'. The necessity for the star to be available for appropriation by the audience, whether for processes of identification or desire, is nowhere more obvious than in the convention within historical films of their appearance conforming to contemporary fashions in hairstyles (and make-up for female stars).<sup>395</sup> As Edward Maeder explains, "While it was desirable that moviegoers believed the historical image...was indeed authentic, it was economically vital that the star's image wasn't sacrificed to history".<sup>396</sup> Two aspects of Heston/Rodrigo's costume also fall into the category of props which Naremore (after Pudovkin) designates 'expressive objects'; these are objects in the mise-en-scène with which the star directly interacts.<sup>397</sup> Heston/Rodrigo is wearing a sword at his side, for example, which his hands move to at key moments in the scene. He also swings his cloak around him as he paces the room, which expresses his impatience but also emphasises his movements, drawing attention to his body in motion.

Deciding which shot of this scene actually qualifies for the description of one in a 'love scene' is revealing in itself. Can we analyse the shots before Chimene/Sophia Loren appears as Heston in a love scene, or is it only potentially one until his love object appears? We could argue he is anticipating her appearance in the opening shots, although his anxious pacing about the room is also narratively motivated by the debate taking place about his conduct in the royal court below.<sup>398</sup> That Heston/Rodrigo's pacing could also be driven by his waiting/hoping for the arrival of Loren/Chimene, is

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<sup>395</sup> Contrasting Heston's hairstyle in this big-budget historical epic with the more historically accurate, but vastly less flattering, 'bowl cut' he wears in the lower budget medieval-set *The Warlord* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1965) exposes the financial considerations that lie behind this convention.

<sup>396</sup> Maeder, E. (1987) 'The Celluloid Image: Historical Dress in Film' in *Hollywood and History: Costume Design in Film* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum), 58.

<sup>397</sup> "Once the object is picked up . . . its significance is inflected by the stance and behaviour of the person holding it." Naremore, J. *Acting in the Cinema*, 85.

<sup>398</sup> Or above? The geography in this sequence is slightly opaque, as the two characters react to the noise of the debate as though it emanates from above them, but as the dome of their room admits beams of sunlight, it is hard to reconcile this in a logical way.



suggested by his first line to her: "You shouldn't have come." Having the 'love scene' proper start with the close-up shot of Heston/Rodrigo that immediately precedes Loren/Chimene's entrance, and follows his pacing, can also be justified. His appearance in it, handsome and pensive with the scene's love theme starting to play over it, presents him as an object of desire and therefore prepares us for a love scene which is, after all, the playing out of the audience's desires as well as the characters'.

Once Rodrigo's mood, position and appearance within the room have been established in this way, the film cuts to Loren/Chimene's entrance. The cut back to Heston/Rodrigo makes it clear to the viewer in retrospect that her entrance hasn't been noticed by him yet, as he is in the same attitude in which we first saw him. This gives the viewer both the pleasure of having greater knowledge than the character and of anticipating his reaction to the entrance of his object of desire. His reaction to her entrance, when he notices it, conveys both yearning and excitement. The way his dawning awareness of her presence is conveyed first by his eyes opening, then his head turning and only finally his body following, draws a physical image of yearning for the viewer, and the way his movements begin quite slowly then speed up until he makes a dramatically abrupt turn, also conveys a sense of excitement. His facial expression is less easily read, suggesting both amazement at her presence, and also a level of trepidation. We may feel this trepidation is due to the debate taking place, in which he is accused of treason, but it could also be motivated by his uncertainty about how Chimene will react to his changed circumstances.

The next shot of Heston/Rodrigo is a long shot which emphasises the distance that still exists between the characters in the scene, as Chimene isn't visible in it, though lots of empty space to his right is. Heston/Rodrigo also, almost imperceptibly, moves his right hand towards her and then brings it back, a tiny gesture that subtly suggests timidity on his part and conveys his uncertainty about her feelings. This small movement of his sword hand also moves his cloak enough to make the pommel visible and the conflict between the demands of love and knighthood that drives many of the film's events is evoked by this combination of gesture, costume and prop. The next shot is a close up of Loren/Chimene in which her indulgent (and, frankly, beautiful) smile assures both the character and the viewer that she still loves him. There follows a close up of Heston/Rodrigo from a slightly low angle. This shot size and angle combined with Heston's physical appearance and facial expression - raised

chin and shining, bright blue eyes - emphasises the ennobling effect of Chimene's love on Rodrigo.<sup>399</sup>

What the star enactment of Charlton Heston brings to this moment is both the performance, in the way he appears to be looking with longing at Loren/Chimene whilst also looking off into the (epic) middle distance, and his specific star connotations, as this is a typical Heston expression that suggests he's also looking towards some larger duty, mission or goal.

Then Heston/Rodrigo starts to smile, but very subtly and minimally, especially in contrast to Chimene's very full smile earlier. This contrast between their smiles gains more significance as the scene progresses and their characters are developed further. Heston/Rodrigo's smile tends to be steady and firm but slightly repressed; this is emphasised by the contrast in their physical appearances: he has much thinner lips than Loren/Chimene's full, voluptuous ones. This contrast extends beyond the physical, however. Heston/Rodrigo's thinner, rarer and occasionally sardonic smile reflects his more controlled (or repressed) emotions, whereas Chimene/Loren's feelings are more obvious and changeable than his and her broader, wider smile makes this clear to both Rodrigo and the audience. When we cut between shots of the characters starting to walk towards one another from either side of the room, the way they do so, with very little upper-body movement, gives a visual representation of them being 'drawn' to one another. Heston/Rodrigo also gives this impression by leaning forward before making a step. We still haven't seen both characters in the same shot and this is part of the mechanics of the pleasures of the 'love scene'. As the audience is expecting to see the acting out of these characters' desire, delaying the first moment of contact creates a pleasurable sense of withheld gratification and builds up anticipation for this moment. The whole scene in fact is made up of a sequence of such movements, as we watch the lovers separately, then see them come together and move apart again, a pattern that is played out on a larger scale throughout the film's narrative.

The first shot in which we see the characters together starts as a long shot of Loren/Chimene, and appears to be following the editing pattern established by the scene so far, in that we have cut between shots of the two characters of similar length and size for ten shots, but, as Loren/Chimene reaches the bottom of the three steps that ring the room, the camera pans left to include the approaching

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<sup>399</sup> I use the character names only here, deliberately to emphasise this point is about characterisation and meaning.

Heston/Rodrigo in the shot and draws back, so we can see the two figures and the space in the centre of the shot that we anticipate they will meet in. The significance of this space is emphasised by a shaft of natural light that falls from the domed ceiling to highlight it. Now that the viewer can anticipate not just the action of the lovers coming together but the physical space where it will occur, the intensification of the emotion in this scene is also accomplished by the music on the soundtrack rising to a crescendo during this shot. As Heston/Rodrigo moves forward we can just make out a smile on his face, and as both characters raise their arms in front of themselves to take hands, neither one looks away from the other throughout.

The next, closer, shot opens on the empty space which we know the characters will enter into, but we see only their outstretched arms entering the space and their hands clasping, on which action the camera moves up and left to frame Heston/Rodrigo's profile in mid shot. He speaks the first line we've heard in the scene when he says, "You shouldn't have come". He is smiling as he speaks and the voice almost has a laugh in it. He also raises his eyebrows in a mock serious way as he delivers this line, which adds to the impression of him teasing her. We cut to Loren/Chimene in a similar shot who, also smiling, replies, "then I'll go". We cut back to the previous shot of Heston/Rodrigo, who smiles a closed mouth smile at first, which broadens to reveal his teeth. He then moves in towards her and then we, almost imperceptibly, cut on this action to a closer shot of the two characters in an embrace: the moment the scene has been working towards since the beginning. That this last cut is so hard to spot is evidence of how effectively the viewer has been interpolated into the scene, but it is possible to identify the ways in which continuity editing has worked very efficiently to achieve this effect. The editing is quite quick between the three shots leading up to the first embrace, and the final cut is a match on action, in that as Heston/Rodrigo moves frame right towards Loren/Chimene the next shot is further right in the diegetic space, making the cut appear 'natural'. But the overwhelming narrative drive towards this moment in a love scene, and the viewer's closer and closer view of and engagement with the characters up to this point, have also created the conditions in which we no longer notice the mechanics of the filmmaking and experience the events as if they were just 'happening'.

This next shot then is a close-up of Heston/Rodrigo and Loren/Chimene in an embrace, cheek to cheek; he is framed right and she left, as they have been throughout the scene so far. They are both open mouthed at this point and, although Hollywood conventions at the time would not allow that to

continue when they actually kiss, this detail, nevertheless, gives a strong sense of their passion.

Loren/Chimene is noticeably whiter and more brightly lit, in keeping with classical Hollywood conventions for representing the genders. She is also lower in the frame which, whilst being a general convention, also emphasises Heston's height, which is specific to his star image and enactments. Heston/Rodrigo's eyes are cast down as the corners of their mouths meet and although they kiss at this point they are only short little kisses, and they sway back and forth against each other. At the point at which one might expect them to kiss fully we sense Loren/Chimene moving away slightly, as if to leave, and the strong movement in response of Heston/Rodrigo, who holds her more tightly and whispers in a breathy voice, "No.... another moment." This gesture reminds us of her earlier, teasing, threat to leave and also represents the first of the, increasingly serious, movements away from Heston/Rodrigo that Loren/Chimene makes in this scene. We also see how Heston/Rodrigo's response is a form of seduction, as he drops his voice to a breathy whisper to say the line. He says the 'no' very quickly in response to her movement and there's quite a pause before he entreats her 'another moment'. The delivery of this line very effectively conveys the feelings of yearning and desire one would expect in a love scene.

When she says she will stay as there is no danger, Heston/Rodrigo laughs ironically, revealing his teeth and narrowing his top lip. This note of irony is another typical feature of Heston's star enactments and may be one of the (implicit) reasons Jancovich and others find him unconvincing in love scenes, or in conveying sincere private emotions generally. Heston's recourse to irony in his star enactments can be read as representing his character's (although surely not his own) emotional distance from events. In this instance it also indicates how his character has a greater understanding of the situation he is facing than she does. "No danger?" he asks with an ironic laugh, and breaks cheek-to-cheek contact with Loren/Chimene by looking up (to where, as has been explained, the noise of the court debate seems to come from): "listen to them" - as he says this in quite a deep voice it conveys the seriousness of the situation but there's also a hint of contempt in his voice. His looking up also shows him once again in profile and contemplating a scene another character cannot visualise, something very typical of his enactments of epic heroes.

As Loren/Chimene says "it doesn't matter" she puts her hands on either side of his face and brings it back down level with hers, physically and psychologically drawing him away from the sound of the

debate and, by extension, the public and political concerns of knighthood. He looks at her and then holds and kisses her right hand. As he turns and lowers his head to do this, the movement from looking right up to right down, emphasises how he has returned to the private and intimate focus on love. When she says, "because I know you're not guilty," he's still holding her hand and as he looks at her quickly in surprise, she kisses him and they return to the cheek-to-cheek embrace that the shot started with. The tone with which he says, "You don't even know what I've done," is even, and this line almost suggests that this is a test of her loyalty to him. His lips are by her forehead temple and, as she says "no", he raises his head up until it's tilted back with his eyes closed in a kind of ecstasy of love. This moment demonstrates how this love scene is as concerned with moral codes as with desire; he's moved by her absolute trust in him which is born of their love. This movement also means her head is now nestling under his chin, with his head above hers, and Heston/Rodrigo can be seen in profile whilst Loren/Chimene is full face. Heston is shot in profile far more often in this scene than Loren, and although the specificities of a star's physical appearance may have some part to play in such preferences (every star has their best side) the profile shot of Heston is an integral part of his star enactment conveying, as it does, a sense of epic presence. This moment is a pause in the scene's forward momentum; it seems to have answered the key question of whether their love will survive the accusations against him.

Heston/Rodrigo is awoken from his moment of rapture by Loren/Chimene's question, "What did you do?" This is the first note of doubt from her, and his eyes, which had been closed since she said "no", open again and his expression turns serious, noble even. He doesn't look at her as we may have expected but instead his eyes have a faraway look; it recalls the epic middle distance stare already mentioned, but it's actually more specific, as though he's seeing again the whole scene which started the film's action. Before speaking he lets out a little sigh, suggesting how unimportant the action was to him, and how he's above the worldly concerns of others, such as the debate taking place, as he knows he's right and it doesn't matter what others say or do. "I let a man live....no, five men." And as he says "no, five" he smiles at the memory; it was because of Chimene that he did it, but he quickly stops smiling and looks serious again for, as her question, "how can they call that treason?" reminds us, he's left out a key part of the story. As the film's narrative makes it clear that Rodrigo's freeing of the Moorish prisoners was a good and noble act, the audience is encouraged to share his doubts about how Chimene is going to react, rather than suspect him of trying to conceal the truth at this point. He

looks down at her with a slightly concerned expression, lowering his eyes, conveying his awareness that this is going to be the hardest part for her to hear. The court hubbub rises again as they move apart slightly to look at each other, and, as Heston/Rodrigo opens his mouth to speak, we hear a cry of "It's the Moors" from the other room. Although we know Rodrigo was about to explain this to Chimene, he is slightly wrong footed by her hearing this before he's told her. They both look up in different directions, Loren/Chimene looking away first and then moving away from him and as the romantic mood is thus broken, they drop hands and the longest shot in the scene ends.

Loren/Chimene turns her back on Heston/Rodrigo and moves away from him with the camera panning after her until he is outside the frame. Just before this happens we see his gaze return to her. The next shot starts with Heston/Rodrigo also alone. He has to move towards her and he has his arms out ready to embrace her. Framing them alone in these two shots emphasises the characters' separation at this point, although all Heston/Rodrigo's gestures suggest he doesn't think it is permanent. This is the second time Loren/Chimene has moved away from him and he's had to try to win her back, but this time she's not teasing. Even when Heston/Rodrigo has moved back to her, and they are once again in the same shot, he cannot see her facial expression, which conveys to the audience alone her growing suspicion as she asks, "Who were these five men?" Heston/Rodrigo, still behind her with his chin and eyes lowered, puts his arms around her and is still looking at her intently and romantically. In fact in one of the scene's more explicitly erotic moments he looks her up and down in an appraising way and puts his face really close to her hair, as if to smell it, before whispering, as though it were an entreaty, "emirs." The word, however, is accompanied by a dark sounding note played on the soundtrack. It's a slightly excruciating moment for the viewer as, due to our position in the hierarchy of knowledge created by the staging of the scene, we can see how he's misjudging her reaction. For her the romantic moment has passed and as her brow furrows we sense her growing coldness. As she turns around and moves away from him she reverses the right/left frame positions which had been maintained until now by the position of the onscreen characters. This adds to the sense of disharmony between them as she demands to know why he let Moors live. We cut to a reverse mid shot of Heston/Rodrigo looking innocent and almost naïve, with his eyes wide open. His shoulders are slightly stooped and he appears relaxed. As he has almost tried to deceive Chimene it is important for the film to establish here that he feels absolutely no guilt or even the slightest doubt as to the rightness of his actions, which this expression helps to emphasise.

With a little smile he says, "I'm not sure it was right," and shrugs and shakes his head. The gestures that signalled his indulgence of her are now used to express indulgence in his own inexplicable behaviour. The audience is thus alerted to the sense that these kinds of behaviour are to be indulged because they arise from the same source, their love for one another. But the way he raises his eyebrows and furrows his forehead also suggests he is genuinely perplexed by his behaviour. Heston/Rodrigo makes a slightly nervous gesture in which he appears to wipe his hand on his side and he leans back a little as he says, "I don't know... it was...." He looks down away from Loren/Chimene in a moment of genuine puzzlement as the love theme begins to play again. This prepares us for the re-establishment of their love and reminds us that his merciful act, which has led to the accusation of treachery, was inspired by that love. In the reaction shot of Loren/Chimene that follows this change in mood is continued when we see her begin to smile and reach out her hand to him on his line "...I was on my way to you."

We cut back to the reverse shot of Heston/Rodrigo, who takes her hand as his initially closed-mouth smile becomes wider and reveals his teeth. His expression is frank as he looks at her intently with his eyebrows raised and he's walking towards her smiling until he looks off into the middle distance saying, "there must have been roads, trees and people..." The camera follows him as he walks around her until he regains his position at the right of the frame. To represent how he has regained her love and trust they are back where they were in their first embrace, spatially as well as emotionally. He turns quite abruptly to look at her again, the suddenness of this movement suggesting the power of his passion and desire, which he still has to restrain at this moment. His arm is outstretched to keep hold of her hand and so he is in profile as he says the line "...all I remember is your face." We then see a close up of Loren/Chimene's face in three-quarter profile with the same beatific, in-love expression she had earlier. As we hear him say, "There was a battle, I fought too", we see her smile in response to the laugh in his voice.

In the reverse shot we see of Heston/Rodrigo he is now facing the camera straight on and both his arms are outstretched and we assume he is holding both Loren/Chimene's hands again. The way his outstretched arms reach outside the frame towards the viewer reminds us of how these shot-reverse-shot sequences have the effect of encouraging the viewer to share both characters' subjective positions at the same time. The shot of Loren/Chimene, although motivated as a point-of-view shot

from Heston/Rodrigo's position and thus placing her as the object of the shot, must also be read as her being the subject of the look when we then cut to the reverse shot of Heston/Rodrigo. So when considering how 'comfortable' (for which read convincing) Heston appears when performing in love scenes we need to consider the processes of both identification and desire that this form of editing encourages. Are we convinced that he acts as we would/should in that situation? Do we like watching him looking at us like a man in love with us? To return to Heston/Rodrigo smiling at Loren/Chimene (and us) with his arms outstretched, he shakes his head slightly as he says "My heart wasn't in my sword...I kept...", he stops smiling as a serious thought strikes him, and he whispers the words, "seeing your face". Once again the sense that he is seducing her is created by the use of this low voice and close look at Loren/Chimene. The next two shots are very short; the first is from over Loren/Chimene's shoulder, although you can't see Heston/Rodrigo, as she puts her hands in his. In the reverse shot he looks down intently and quickly takes her hands to kiss them but before he does we cut to a closer shot. These very short shots and the actions within them thus represent the speed with which passion overcomes them.

As Heston/Rodrigo raises her hands to kiss them in this closer shot, Loren/Chimene comes into the frame and is brought closer to Heston/Rodrigo by his action of holding and kissing her hands close to his face. We see Heston/Rodrigo kiss her hand then look at it and swallow slightly before looking up at Loren/Chimene. They both look at one another for a moment before kissing, but it's only a short kiss again. After the kiss he opens his mouth and exclaims "oh" and then smiles as she touches his cheek. They draw away slightly and look at one another again; Heston/Rodrigo feels he has to say more to explain himself. He looks down at her hands and shakes his head slightly before continuing, "Suddenly..." and we cut to a longer shot as he turns and leads her, walking off left together still holding hands. Heston/Rodrigo then turns so we can see him, but only the back of her, during his speech. A reversal of the earlier composition where he couldn't see her reaction to his words, but we in the audience could. He continues "...I thought why are we killing each other? True, they're Moors, we're Christians..." He stops and looks at her in amazement/wonder, he's been struck by a thought and looks serious. He touches the hand of hers that he's holding, as he's trying to explain, but it is as though it's something he doesn't fully understand, or certainly can't explain simply and easily.



We see a closer shot of Heston/Rodrigo in which he looks concerned, with lowered eyebrows, as he asks, "Do you understand...what I'm trying to say?" in quite a quiet and hesitant voice.<sup>400</sup> In the reverse shot of Loren/Chimene she looks concerned and breaks away from him again, and we hear low dramatic notes on the soundtrack. A longer shot allows us to see her turn her back on him and walk away. As we follow her away from him, she's holding both her hands clasped in front of herself and as she says, "Yes but..." Heston/Rodrigo is left out of shot holding out his now empty hand, "there have always been wars between us." We have returned visually and emotionally to the first time we saw her break away from him and for the same reason, she's framed to the left as Heston enters frame right behind her. She's facing the camera and Heston is in profile. The viewer expecting to watch a 'love scene' has had their expectations met and confounded twice now and the expected climax, a full kiss/embrace, hasn't yet been achieved. But this shot isn't over yet.

Heston/Rodrigo is standing very close behind her again, she's looking impassively ahead. As he says, "I know..." he raises his far hand to stroke her hair, as he had seemed to breathe it in earlier. He hesitates before touching her, an ambiguous gesture that can suggest both his doubt about her feelings but also an exercise in self-control, as he clearly wants to but manages to control himself. He then moves this hand behind her and around her waist and says "...always...You don't think then..." and he moves his other arm around her waist from the front, so she's in his embrace again and draws her towards his chest. He says these words as though he's seducing her to his point of view, but Loren/Chimene remains inscrutable throughout, not changing her position or facial expression. His voice gets softer with each line and he closes his eyes as he rests his forehead against her head and finishes with almost a whisper: "... we could live in peace?" It is at this point that Loren/Chimene closes her eyes, as Heston/Rodrigo did earlier, in a moment of giving oneself up to ecstasy. This moment is interrupted however, before Loren/Chimene can say what she thinks or feels, by the hubbub of the debate taking place before the king. Her eyes snap open and look upward. Heston/Rodrigo also looks

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<sup>400</sup> That this isn't unbearably patronising is due to the genre convention by which epic heroes, and they alone, understand concepts and values that are ahead of their time and contemporary with the audience, be it religious tolerance, the message of Christ or the genius of an artist. This gives the audience a pleasurable sense of the superiority of the times they live in and of themselves, as Vivian Sobchack suggests: "the . . . work of Hollywood's epic histories seems to be the subjectification and projection of 'ourselves-now' as 'we-then'" (1995) 'Surge and Splendour: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic' in B.K. Grant (ed.) *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 283-4.

up and round and visibly swallows and his eyebrows furrow. The climactic moment of the love scene has thus been deferred yet again.

The film then cuts to the scene in the royal court and we see Chimene's father challenge Rodrigo's to a duel for defending his son. When we return to the love scene the protagonists are no longer framed together in an embrace. Instead we cut between two separate shots of them, both from disorientating overhead angles, as they turn at the sound of the dramatic conclusion of the debate (Chimene's father striking Rodrigo's across the face with his glove) looking worried. We then cut to an overhead shot from a strange angle which includes both of them. Heston/Rodrigo is up the three steps near the door, where we first saw him, and Loren/Chimene is below him. They are both looking round in a concerned way but they don't look at each other until the end of the shot, when Loren/Chimene looks to Heston/Rodrigo and runs up the steps to him. He opens his arms as she approaches and she puts hers out to hold him; the film cuts on this action to a closer shot as the music rises. Loren/Chimene's face is on his chest as they embrace; in the close-up on her key-lit full face we see her looking concerned and puzzled. Heston/Rodrigo is in profile and his face is more dramatically shadowed. His narrowed eyes mean he looks pained, but also determined, as he lifts his further hand to stroke her hair. This differs from his earlier erotic gesture of stroking her hair in being a much more comforting and protective gesture. His expression suggests that he's still not sure if she understands and therefore loves him and that her reaction matters greatly to him, but it also suggests part of his mind, at least, is thinking about the implications of what has passed in the royal court. His concern appears to be justified, as her first words are "I don't understand Rodrigo...." but she continues, "I only know, if it grew out of our love..." and on the word love he reacts and looks down at her with hope, "... it must be right." He takes his hand off her head as she moves out and up to him, he raises her up and they finally kiss each other. The camera moves in close as they kiss and Heston/Rodrigo's arms, first one and then the other, enfold her tightly, and the kiss continues as the shot fades out, finally meeting the viewer's expectations of a love scene and delivering the anticipated climax that had been repeatedly delayed.

This application of the analytical framework and the use of an ekphrastic rendering allows for an appreciation of the subtle ways in which Heston's star enactment conveys his character's thoughts, feelings and emotions. His tentative gestures towards Loren/Chimene, for example, suggest not only

his love and need for her, but also his awareness of how important it is to approach her carefully and delicately. His use of a low and breathy voice at key moments conveys the strength of his emotion and a seductive aspect to his behaviour that may be surprising, given Jancovich's characterisation of Heston's limitations as a performer. Key passionate gestures, such as the way he holds and kisses Loren/Chimene's hands or draws her into his embrace, may be expected in a love scene, but this analysis has been able to suggest how they are also carefully placed within the ebb and flow of a scene in which Heston/Rodrigo isn't always sure of his lover's reactions. The 'uncomfortableness' identified by Jancovich can also therefore be more credibly assigned to Heston/Rodrigo's awareness of a possible conflict between his duty and his love. It is this that explains his distracted moments of looking away from Loren/Chimene at certain points and away into the middle distance, as well as his occasionally sardonic smile and laugh.

Higson suggests that "performance is interestingly placed at the intersection of the text, the actor/character and the audience" and this reading has attempted to consider all three of these elements at the same time in order to foreground just how star enactments contribute to what he describes as "a polysemic production of meaning and pleasure, crucially dependent on the moment of viewing."<sup>401</sup> Thus the effect of Heston's gestures, body position, speaking voice and facial expressions cannot be isolated from other aspects of film form but only read from within them. This ekphrastic rendering of the scene has highlighted how Heston's performance conveys more than someone (Charlton Heston himself?) being profoundly uncomfortable. Heston's enactment we can now see is not of a character uncomfortable with intimacy or personal feelings; his gestures, movements and voice are all appropriate for someone enacting a love scene. The character he portrays, however, can be seen to be uncomfortable when asked to explain his behaviour and motives, and he is in an uncomfortable situation because he may be found guilty of treachery. He is not worried that he has behaved dishonourably but because he can see the conflict it will lead to, especially with Chimene's father.

But what is appropriate in an enactment is also determined by genre. Many of the features of Heston's enactment are structured by the demands of the epic genre. Gledhill insists that:

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<sup>401</sup> Higson, A. (2004) 'Film Acting and Independent Cinema' in Robertson Wojcik, P. (ed.) *Movie Acting: A Film Reader* (London: Routledge), 146.

Attention to the aesthetic requirements [of a genre], however, suggests a gap between imaginative and representational functions, which should delay the immediate translation of the one in terms of the other.<sup>402</sup>

This is also a useful warning not to immediately judge the enactments in one genre in the terms of another or a more general standard of performance. One of the aesthetic requirements of the epic genre which has been identified is the kind of hero it demands. The epic hero fits the patriarchal stereotype identified by Gledhill as 'The Crusading Hero', whose power is premised on his invulnerability to women.<sup>403</sup> Steve Neale has also noted of the hero in epic film that, "the constant in these films ... is the lure of alternatives to duty and the Law," which he suggests is often figured in the female.<sup>404</sup>

Whilst Rodrigo's relationship to Chimene doesn't appear in quite such black-and-white terms in this sequence (he's not 'invulnerable' to Chimene), it is clear that Rodrigo's heroic status means he is not willing or able to compromise his crusade even if it means losing Chimene. This generic demand may well explain more fruitfully the enactment of discomfort that can be identified in certain of Heston's gestures and expressions in this sequence, such as his gazing away from Loren/Chimene to a thing or place she cannot see and his hesitations before touching or holding her. This also explains the seductive aspect of his performance, not a feature normally identified in Heston's enactments, for if he can't convince her of the righteousness of his actions she will be lost to him. The more general demands of a love scene can thus be seen to have been inflected by the demands of a type of scene more specific to the epic genre: a testing scene. Although testing scenes aren't exclusive to the epic genre they are a key feature of the construction of the epic hero.<sup>405</sup> As anticipated, this attempt to isolate the specifics of a star enactment demands a subtle understanding of the interaction between genre and performance. Analysing one enactment in one genre, however, does not confidently allow for wider conclusions to be drawn about the Heston aesthetic, although it may allow for a correction to

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<sup>402</sup> Gledhill, 'Women Reading Men', 77.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>404</sup> Neale, S. (1992) *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge) 91.

<sup>405</sup> Neale, S. (1983) 'Masculinity as Spectacle', *Screen*, 24, 6, 2-16.

be made to simplistic judgements of his performance style. This analysis leads to the same conclusion as deCordova when he says:

First there must be a close analysis of the way in which performance is structured within particular films and particular genres....Second, a more comparative approach to the problem of genre and performance needs to be taken.<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> DeCordova, R. (1995) 'Genre and Performance: An Overview' in B.K. Grant (ed.) *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press).

## Five Isolating the Star Aesthetic I: Commutation

Although the ekphrastic method applied in the previous chapter has proved that the description of star enactments can be successfully and usefully produced by academic writers for academic readers, the insights it offers are of a comparatively narrow nature and, as such, do not necessarily allow for conclusions to be drawn about the differences *between* stars and their enactments, or even to pinpoint what is specific to one star. For that a less concentrated and more comparative approach is necessary. In order to develop a more rigorous method of analysing star enactments and identifying the star aesthetic therefore, we shall return to the commutation test. One of the perceived weaknesses of this approach, identified by John O. Thompson, is that:

Its effect is to keep before our attention how problematic the terms we use to characterise differences among performances are. There seem to be differences without terms to capture them, and terms which bundle together an indefinite range of differences.<sup>407</sup>

As I argued in Chapter Two, however, this desire for universal and objective terminology is self-defeating and ultimately futile. The framework for analysis proposed in that chapter will be applied, therefore, to demonstrate how existing terminology is more than adequate for 'characterising the differences among performances.' A focus on *enactment* rather than *performance*, moreover, allows for such differences to be read in conjunction with other kinds of knowledge about the star. In this approach no single gesture, expression, stance etc. can, or should, be read in isolation from the whole star image and so the search for universal descriptive terms can be replaced with more specific renderings.

In order to demonstrate the benefits of a combination of detailed analysis of the star enactment with commutation, this chapter will consist of two close analyses of sequences from comparable film genres starring comparable stars. This will allow for the specific aesthetic dynamic of Charlton Heston's star

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<sup>407</sup> John O. Thompson (1998) [1978] 'Screen Acting and the Commutation Test' in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge), 190.

enactments to be identified more securely. Although commutation demands a more comparative approach to star enactments than the single ekphrastic rendering of the last chapter contained, for any such comparison to be valid the variability of other elements that may contribute to the meaning of a scene will need to be minimised as far as possible. In order to make this comparative exercise as effective as possible, and limit the number of variables outside that of the star enactments themselves, it will therefore be necessary to identify two similar stars, in similar film roles and genres, from similar periods.

### ***You've Seen One, You've Seen Them All: Limiting the Variables***

As was discussed in Chapter Two, surprisingly few critics have taken up the challenge which commutation testing lays down: that of imagining the differences that would emerge from the substitution of one star for another in a specific film role. Indeed, I intend to alter the method slightly by undertaking a preliminary stage of comparative analysis of two sequences from different films before attempting any commutation, using that detailed comparison to draw out the specificities of each star enactment. This should mean that there is far more solid evidence on which to base any consideration of how the stars' commutation would have affected the respective films' meaning and effect. One of the other key ways in which my use of the commutation test will differ from John O. Thompson's application of it, is in the rigorous application of the two additional analytical frameworks offered by genre and star study respectively to the films and stars under investigation. Once again this should allow for a more rigorous level of comparison and contrast to be achieved in the subsequent commutation. The commutation itself will be made between comparable scenes from *Ben Hur* (William Wyler, 1959) and *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960). Although the assumption that underpins a great deal of genre criticism, that films from the same genre share more characteristics with each other than with other films produced at the same time and under the same institutional conditions, has recently been undermined by new approaches to genre and Hollywood:

The concept of genre in Film Studies should logically expand to include categories, corpuses and terms like 'feature film' and 'documentary' as well as 'science fiction', 'horror' and 'western', and...on these grounds alone most films are multiply generic.<sup>408</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> Neale, S. (2000) *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge), 2.

Rather than engaging directly in this debate its implications have been allowed for by selecting films that not only share the same genre classification but were also produced at the same historical period under the same institutional structures. *Ben Hur* and *Spartacus* were produced and released only one year apart, which means that differences due to the historical and social context of the period of production are quite limited. Their production contexts are also comparable, both being examples of 'runaway productions', which Hollywood increasingly relied on to reduce production costs after the Paramount decrees.<sup>409</sup> We can thus acknowledge that they both may well share features with the ur-genre of 'Hollywood entertainment cinema', as well as with what would, from this perspective, be seen as the subgenre of the epic film.<sup>410</sup>

### **Describing the Epic Genre Structure**

Despite recent critical scepticism towards the application, and even the concept, of genre in film studies there exists, nevertheless, a consensus around the items that are regularly isolated for discussion under the heading of genre. As Altman acknowledges, "genres are typically defined according to a . . . limited range of characteristics," although it must be conceded that different kinds of characteristics are given relatively more or less significance depending on the genre under discussion.<sup>411</sup> Rather than attempting to identify the characteristics of the epic genre, it has proved more useful to utilise previously published work on the genre, which allows for the identification of those features that both *Ben Hur* and *Spartacus* share. A further distinction will be made however, in the discussion that follows, between those features of a genre which are semantic and those which are syntactic, as this will remind us of the importance of considering both when attempting to identify films which share as many genre variables as possible.<sup>412</sup> A wholly semantic approach, such as that found in Derek Elley's *The Epic Film*, is one that is perhaps out of critical favour at the moment, as evinced by Vivian Sobchack's criticism of how it:

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<sup>409</sup> "Shooting American films in locations overseas . . . became known as 'runaway production'. In addition to providing authentic locales, foreign shooting provided the opportunity to hire workers whose salary scales were lower than Hollywood's." T. Balio, (1976) *The American Film Industry* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press), 400.

<sup>410</sup> As Richard Maltby puts it "Hollywood is a generic cinema, which is not the same as saying it is a cinema of genres", (2000) *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 107.

<sup>411</sup> Altman, R. (1999) *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing), 22.

<sup>412</sup> See Altman, R. 'A semantic/syntactic approach to film genre', reprinted as an appendix to *Film/Genre*, 216-226.



Conservatively focuses on epics beginning with biblical history and ending with early medieval history – indeed, defining the historical epic by the historical *distance* of its temporal content from the present.<sup>413</sup>

She implicitly contrasts this approach with her own focus on the more syntactical features of the genre, what she labels its 'aesthetic extravagances', including widescreen technologies, casts of thousands, and spectacular costumes. As Rick Altman suggests however, "to be recognised as a genre, films must have both a common topic . . . and a common structure, a common way of configuring that topic," and so this analysis will attempt to identify both semantic aspects of topic and syntactic features of form in its categorisation of the two films.<sup>414</sup>

It is true that Elley identifies semantic features to the almost total exclusion of structural ones in his definition of the epic film, but Sobchack's equally exclusive focus on the structural risks including in her discussion films that most audiences would not define as epics, for although the films she chooses to discuss display those features she has identified as part of an epic structure, they are concerned with a wide variety of non-epic subjects (such as modern wars and the Wild West) that are usually found in other genres.<sup>415</sup> They are, therefore, unlikely to be widely recognised as epic films, despite using elements of the epic form. This distinction is acknowledged by Altman in his discussion of the generic status of *Star Wars*:

Some critics described *Star Wars* as a Western. Their desire to integrate this film into the corpus of the Western did not hold sway, however, for the general tendency of genre theorists and the popular audience alike is to recognise genre only when both subject and structure coincide.<sup>416</sup>

The designation 'epic' has suffered more than most from this critical broadening, with films regularly being described as 'epic' based on formal rather than thematic features. It will be necessary therefore,

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<sup>413</sup> Elley, D., (1984) *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul); Sobchack, V. (1995) 'Surge and Splendour: A Phenomenology of the Historical Epic' in B. K. Grant (ed.) *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 304.

<sup>414</sup> Altman, *Film/Genre*, 23.

<sup>415</sup> The film she refers to in most detail, for example, is *How the West Was Won* (1962, John Ford, Henry Hathaway and George Marshall).

<sup>416</sup> Altman, *Film/Genre*, 24.

in the discussion that follows, to distinguish between 'epic' being used as a generalised adjective and 'Epic', which designates a specific set of generic expectations.

### **Epic with a Capital 'E'**

Derek Elley uses the term 'The Epic Film' as the title for his survey of the genre. He nevertheless then proceeds to regularly use the term 'historical epic' synonymously with 'Epic film'. A sense of history is evidently a key feature of the genre for him, as his insistence on the historical distance between the events in the film and the time of its production makes clear. The historicism he identifies and discusses in these films is a matter of style and setting, however, not of the source material for the narrative. In this his delineation of the genre agrees with Sobchack's when she argues:

The Hollywood historical epic is not so much the narrative accounting of *specific historical events* as it is the narrative construction of *general historical eventfulness*. This is perhaps why the genre is popularly conceived as such an admixture of different kinds (and not merely periods) of past events: mythic, biblical, folkloric and quasi- or "properly" historical.<sup>417</sup>

In order to undertake more detailed analysis and to identify more shared conventions, criticism of specific genres often descends into the identification of more and more detailed subgenres. Elley's book is no exception, subdividing the Epic film as it does into various historical periods (such as Biblical, Ancient Greece, Rome and Early Medieval) and adding further subdivisions to most of those categories. What is interesting for this investigation is not so much the *reductio ad absurdum* problem of genre criticism that this exemplifies, but how he chooses to categorise *Spartacus* and *Ben Hur*, and thus, how many generic features they are seen to share. Although both films are discussed by Elley under the heading 'Imperial Rome', they are then divided into different sub-subgenres; respectively *Slaves and Barbarians* and *Christian Conflicts*.<sup>418</sup> Although 'Imperial Rome' may be a merely descriptive category, these further subdivisions suggest that there may be more substantial thematic differences between these two films that make their commutation problematic. This is partly due to

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<sup>417</sup> Sobchack, V. 'Surge and Splendour', 286.

<sup>418</sup> See chapter headings in Elley, *The Epic Film*.

certain atypical features of *Spartacus*, not least that it isn't actually set in Imperial Rome at all but during the Republican period.<sup>419</sup>

*Ben Hur* and *Spartacus* are unequivocally categorised together, however, by Babington and Evans in their analysis of 'Biblical Epics'. They subdivide the biblical epic in a similar way to Elley, by biblical source, but place both *Ben Hur* and *Spartacus* in the subgenre 'The Roman/Christian Epic.' Their justification for this categorisation of *Spartacus*, which may seem a strange place to locate a film based on events that took place in the years B.C., is that "*Spartacus*, dramatising events in the late Roman republic predating Christianity is . . . touched by Christian meanings".<sup>420</sup> They are supported in this reading by Derek Elley who, despite using different classifications, suggests that the character of Spartacus can be seen "as a vague Moses/Christ figure . . . who recognises but never enjoys the Promised Land".<sup>421</sup> The overtly Christian parallels in *Spartacus* have been more recently discussed by Martin Winkler:

Historically, Spartacus and the slaves only wanted to be free. According to Hollywood, Spartacus, like Jesus, came into the world to end the struggle, as he says on the mountainside, by making all men free.<sup>422</sup>

These struggles over the difficulties such strictly semantic labelling gives to these writers, which also fails to fully account for those precise features the two films share, should concern us less here than the common thematic concerns that they can and do identify in the films. Similar concerns encourage them to consider the films as sharing the same subgenre: in particular, the heroic role of the main character as a chosen leader of people against forms of Roman Imperial oppression.

This thematic similarity is one of the characteristics that led Leon Hunt to discuss both films under the generic category he labelled the 'Male Epic'.<sup>423</sup> Some of the features he identifies as being common to this genre and the ways in which they apply to *Spartacus* and *Ben Hur* can be summarised as follows:

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<sup>419</sup> Elley justifies his categorisation of the film thus: "the story of *Spartacus* is in fact set in the Republic, but in theme, ambition and outlook it belongs very much to the Imperial collection." Elley, *The Epic Film*, 109.

<sup>420</sup> Babington and Evans, *Biblical Epics*, 178.

<sup>421</sup> Elley, *The Epic Film*, 111.

<sup>422</sup> Martin M. Winkler (2007) 'The Holy Cause of Freedom: American Ideals in *Spartacus*' in *Spartacus: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 184.

*They contain a heroic, central male character, after whom the film is named, who is somehow transfigured. In this process his name and naming plays a key role.*

This feature can be clearly seen in both films. Most obviously in 'Spartacus' when the defeated slaves claim in solidarity with the hero, "I'm Spartacus," but also when Spartacus first arrives at the gladiator school. After asking his name the trainer then ignores it and pointedly addresses him as 'slave'. In *Ben Hur* there is a pivotal scene just before the chariot race when the hero rejects his adoptive Roman name of Arrius, and all it represents, and reclaims his Jewish name and identity of Judah Ben Hur.

*The hero usually gives up his life in the film's resolution.*

Kirk Douglas/Spartacus is crucified in the film's concluding scenes but Ben Hur survives, which is unusual for both the male epic and a Heston character in a historical epic. This can be explained by the fact that his narratively expected death is taken on by Christ.

*There are certain generic set pieces which display the male body, including chariot races, gladiatorial combat and crucifixion.*

Heston's semi-nude body is displayed in scenes such as those when he is a galley slave and shipwrecked, as well as in the chariot race, and Douglas/Spartacus' in gladiator training and fights and his final crucifixion.

Hunt's generic classification can be seen as being more theoretically than semantically driven, focusing as it does on representations of masculinity, but he nevertheless places *Spartacus* and *Ben Hur* together in it, reinforcing what this analysis has shown, that the two films share enough semantic and syntactic similarities for the commutation of sequences from them to prove fruitful.

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<sup>423</sup> Hunt, L. (1993) 'What are Big Boys Made Of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic' in Kirkham, P. and J. Thumim (eds) *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* (London: Lawrence and Wishart), 65-83.

## Epic Performance Style

One reason for choosing to commute Charlton Heston with Kirk Douglas in Epic roles is to investigate further Heston's close association with this genre and the part played in this by his physical appearance. As deCordova has suggested, "further attention to the presence of the body, in the context of genre studies, might lead to an investigation of the ways in which certain actors appear as icons of specific genres".<sup>424</sup> Commuting these two stars will allow for a focus on that bodily presence, how it is rendered and how it might contribute to such iconographic status. But, as was mentioned in Chapter Two, deCordova also suggested other areas that need to be addressed when investigating the interrelationship between star and genre, for example "examination of the ways that different genres circumscribe the form and position of performance in film is an important and underdeveloped area".<sup>425</sup> If, as he suggests, genre does circumscribe performance style, this is one less variable in the commutation, in that both stars can be expected to be adopting a similar performance style. In order to ascertain whether this is the case, however, some sense of what such a performance style might be needs to be developed.

There have been some useful comments on the subject of performance style in writings on the Epic film, although it has not, to my knowledge, been analysed or commented on in any depth, unlike melodrama or the musical for example.<sup>426</sup> Nevertheless, what has been suggested provides a useful starting point for this analysis. Babington and Evans, for example, identify *sublimity* as the dominant note in star enactments of Epic heroes. The concept of the sublime has a long history in aesthetic approaches to artistic texts: it has been described as comprising "the majestic, the awe-inspiring, and the literally overpowering," and as such its invocation in the delineation of an Epic performance style can be readily understood.<sup>427</sup> The sublime is also said to "speak the language of excess and hyperbole," and this can be readily applied to both the appearance and the performance of Epic

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<sup>424</sup> DeCordova, R. (1995) 'Genre and Performance: An Overview' in Grant, B. K. (ed.) (1995) *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 129-139.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>426</sup> See, for example, Gledhill, C. (2000) 'Signs of Melodrama' in *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge), 207-229.

<sup>427</sup> 'The Artificial Infinite' in Kuhn, A. (ed.) (1999) *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Verso), 255.

stars/characters. Babington and Evans see sublimity being conveyed through the *monumentality* of the stars' enactment:

Sublimity is the dominant rule, whether resting on a charisma based on internal rather than physical strength ... or whether it takes the form of the monumentality of physical appearance, voice and gesture.<sup>428</sup>

Whilst this use of the term *monumentality* may well remind us of Michael Wood's comment that in the last shot of Heston as Moses in *The Ten Commandments* he replicates the pose of the Statue of Liberty,<sup>429</sup> Wood also argues that one of the major elements of the Epic film as a genre is "certain sturdy, straight-faced acting styles," and Peter Lev can be seen to have identified similar features of performance style when he suggests that the acting in *The Ten Commandments* is "a mixture of standard Hollywood and something less familiar....a unique and curious acting style – simplified, a bit larger than life, but consistent and usually dignified".<sup>430</sup> From these comments there is already a sense emerging, however untheorised, of what an Epic performance style may be seen to consist of. Through attention to what this linked terminology of monumentality, sublimity, simplicity and dignity points to, it is possible to be more alert to those aspects of the enactment which may be generically constructed and, in detailed analysis of specific sequences, to delineate how such effects may be achieved.

### **Epic Stars**

For commutation to be effective, however, more than just performance style has to be similar; the stars themselves have to share enough characteristics to be interchangeable, at least to some extent. Indeed it is in teasing out just how far this 'extent' extends that specificities can be identified. Stars and their casting has been seen as a key feature of both the Epic film's semantics and structure as Sobchack points out: "stars both dramatize and construct Hollywood's particular idea of History – lending the past a present stature".<sup>431</sup> Many writers on the genre have discussed the kind of stars who

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<sup>428</sup> Babington, B. and P. Evans (1993) *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 228.

<sup>429</sup> Wood, M. (1989) *America in the Movies or "Santa Maria, It Had Slipped My Mind"* (New York: Columbia University Press), 187.

<sup>430</sup> Wood, *ibid.*, 175 and Lev, P. (2003) *Transforming the Screen 1950-1959* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press), 166.

<sup>431</sup> Sobchack, 'Surge and Splendour,' 280.

recurred in this genre and Babington and Evans identify Heston and Douglas as examples of Epic stars whose “sublimity takes the form of monumentality of physical appearance, voice and gesture”.<sup>432</sup> But Heston and Douglas’s suitability for Epic roles was not just a function of their appearance and performance, as Sobchack explains: “stars are cast not as characters but *in* character - as ‘types’ who, however physically particular and concrete, signify universal and general characteristics”.<sup>433</sup> Richard Dyer addressed the idea of stars as types in *Stars*, where he suggested that social types already exist in the world as social constructs but are drawn on by the star image through the roles they play. Less helpfully, however, the types he discusses are mostly contemporary ‘social types’ and thus not identifiable in Epic films which set, as they are, in the distant past, are unlikely to contain examples of the ‘good Joe’ or ‘tough guy’.<sup>434</sup> More useful, therefore, is Andrew Spicer’s term ‘cultural types’ which he describes as “the staple representation of gender in popular fiction”.<sup>435</sup> Although Spicer suggests that within cultural types “the distinction between social types and archetypes is often blurred,” Christine Gledhill distinguishes effectively between them when she makes the important point that:

Whereas individualised characters who authenticate recognition, and stereotypes which offer short-cuts to it, are rooted in particular historical and cultural conditions, the archetype exceeds its socially specific sources, emerging as a distillation of stereotypical features and evolving through an accretion of uses across decades, forms and national cultures.<sup>436</sup>

A type such as the *Crusading Hero* which Gledhill identifies in her analysis of melodrama, therefore, can be seen to appear transhistorically in both Epic films and contemporarily set thrillers. The characters of *Spartacus* and *Judah Ben Hur* both fit the definition of the *Crusading Hero*, as within the films’ diegesis they “embody a masculinist ethos” and “represent lessons in the forms and exercise of power”.<sup>437</sup> This fit between star and character archetype had also been established by both stars in

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<sup>432</sup> Babington and Evans, *Biblical Epics*, 228.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>434</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 53.

<sup>435</sup> Spicer, A. (2001) *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris), 1.

<sup>436</sup> Spicer, *ibid.* and Gledhill, C. (1995) ‘Women Reading Men’ in P. Kirkham and J. Thumim (eds) *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Men* (New York: St. Martin’s Press), 81.

<sup>437</sup> “Those figures which embody a masculinist ethos, such as the *Crusading Hero* . . . they represent lessons in the forms and exercise of power,” 81.

previous roles. Heston's role of Moses in *The Ten Commandments* embodied a masculinist ethos, especially in his rejection of romance and women, and was predicated on his struggle for power with the pharaoh Rameses. Douglas' role as Colonel Dax in *Paths of Glory* (Stanley Kubrick, 1957) was played out in the masculine world of the military, and his character was shown heroically struggling against the corrupt military authorities.

There are also relevant similarities in the wider context of both stars' filmographies as by 1959/60 they had both appeared in Westerns, historical dramas, film noirs, Biopics and Epics. In this final significant genre Douglas had appeared in *Ulysses* in 1954 and *The Vikings* in 1958 and Heston in *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Both had played antiheroes as well as heroes and their star images, therefore, at this point in their careers share enough characteristics for them to be imaginable in each other's roles. An institutional similarity between the two stars is the path they took to Hollywood stardom as they were both 'discovered' and signed by the same producer, Hal Wallis, who put them through his 'star machine' in the early fifties.<sup>438</sup> There is even anecdotal evidence that Douglas had wanted the part of Judah Ben Hur in *Ben Hur* himself and part of his motivation in choosing to produce and star in *Spartacus* was this missed opportunity.<sup>439</sup> Therefore they have plenty of similarities to make them good subjects for commuting.

### **From Star Type to Star Image**

Dyer distinguishes further, however, between the star *type* and the star *image*. He sees the latter as being constructed by a range of media texts, not just film roles. He further suggests that "stars embody social types, but star images are always more complex and specific than types".<sup>440</sup> For the purposes of commutation, however, it is important to consider the similarities rather than the differences in Heston and Douglas' star images. This not only demonstrates their suitability for commutation but it also suggests that the differences between star images may have been overemphasised by some approaches to star studies. It is important to acknowledge that, as with star types, star images are also

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<sup>438</sup> "A self proclaimed 'starmaker,' Wallis helped launch young talents such as Lizabeth Scott, Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster and Charlton Heston." Dick, B.F. (2004) *Hal Wallis: Producer to the Stars* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 108.

<sup>439</sup> He is quoted as saying, "That was what spurred me to do it, in a childish way – the 'I'll show them' sort of thing," by Stephen Farber on the supplement to the Criterion Collection edition DVD of *Spartacus*.

<sup>440</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 60.



constructed to fit existing broad archetypes. The star biography sheets provided by Douglas' and Heston's respective film studios at the time of filming *Ben Hur* and *Spartacus* demonstrate the similarities in their star images, even beyond the similarities one might expect all such star biographies to share.<sup>441</sup> Thus we are informed that both stars worked their way through college, had their talent noticed and nurtured by alert Drama/English teachers and also excelled at sport. The mixture of brains and physicality that both stars were expected to convey on screen as Epic heroes is enhanced by information offered about their cultural tastes: we are told, for example, that both like to read biographies. Douglas "likes modern art and classical music" and Heston "prefers symphonic music". We are also informed that Douglas "keeps in enviable physical condition," and similarly that "Tennis and horseback riding are [Heston's] favourite sports for keeping in trim." Although there may be minor differences in the specific details here, the key features of the image (cultured, physically fit etc.) are so similar as to be almost interchangeable.

It is these similarities that allow for a much sharper commutation than was achievable through John O. Thompson's original application of the test, as it was his choice of stars to commute that proved to be its biggest weakness. Far from sharing enough similarities to allow for a subtle exploration of their specific differences through commutation, the star figures of Ava Gardner and Grace Kelly are so completely opposed to one another in all the areas that create the star image that the analysis of their differences would never be likely to move beyond the glaringly obvious (and the reasons they were cast against each other in the first place): the brunette versus the blonde, the good versus the bad girl etc., as they are not similar but opposite star types. Heston and Douglas, on the other hand, have been shown to share many key similarities, from the promotion of their physical appearance and prowess to their previous film roles, to allow for an imagined substitution to be plausible and capable of revealing more subtle differences.

### **An Epic Scene Type: Testing Scenes**

Another development from previous versions of the commutation test will be that the enactments of these similar stars will not be compared and contrasted merely through their appearance in the same

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<sup>441</sup> These star biography sheets, which are reproduced in appendix II, were accessed through the Bill Douglas Centre, and are listed in their catalogue as Film Personality Biography sheets. Other similarities include the familiar rags-to-riches arc of both their biographies.

genre, but through a carefully selected stock scene of that genre. This offers a form of comparison that is both rigorous and repeatable, thus overcoming the weaknesses of the other examples of commutation we have considered so far, not just Thompson's but also those based on the evidence of film remakes. To commute the enactment of two stars in two such scenes relies on establishing enough semantic and syntactic similarities between two scenes to make any differences arising from a detailed comparison valid. This is one of the reasons why genre is a useful variable: certain scene types are narratively determined by the genre and are often played out in the same way. The scene type selected for this analysis is the *testing scene* which occurs regularly in Epic films. It was Steve Neale who first discussed the significance of scenes of men being tested for representations of masculinity in film, arguing that instances of male combat which function in this way include the gladiatorial combat in *Spartacus*, but such scenes are equally important, generically, for the construction of the Epic hero.<sup>442</sup> Both *Spartacus* and *El Cid* contain an example of this scene type in which the hero is tested both physically and mentally. These scenes are also, not coincidentally, an opportunity for narratively motivated exposure of the male stars' body to the gaze of both onscreen characters and the viewer in the audience.

The testing scenes I have chosen to commute are the first occasion in both films in which the hero is tested in this public way, but by no means the last. The climactic chariot race in *Ben Hur* and the final gladiatorial fight between Spartacus and Antoninus in *Spartacus* fulfil equally the demands of this scene type. The two selected scenes are also, however, the scenes that contain the most exposure of the stars' bodies. Such bodily display is such a key feature of both the genre and the stars' enactments that this is a further reason for their selection. There is an equally generic sequence of inspection and selection immediately prior to the testing scene in both films, which is vital for establishing the context of the test that follows. In both sequences the Epic hero is selected for their harsh physical test as much for their mental resistance to those characters who hold power over them as for their physical strength. This inspection and selection process works to emphasise the perverse power relations that exist between the Epic hero and his antagonist(s), as he has to passively endure the humiliation of being publicly inspected and is able to express his resistance in a very limited way. The tensions that are thus established will be further elaborated in the testing scenes that follow.

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<sup>442</sup> Neale, S. (1983) 'Masculinity and Spectacle', *Screen* 24, 6, 14.

## Pre-Test Inspection and Selection

The scene under consideration in *Spartacus* in which Kirk Douglas/Spartacus is tested appears near the beginning of the film, and takes place in the gladiatorial school to which he has been condemned for striking a Roman officer. Douglas/Spartacus is one of two pairs of trainee gladiators who are hand-picked by two visiting Roman matrons to fight to the death for their pleasure. There are quite obvious sexual overtones to the inspection and selection scenario which precedes the fight itself. The women choose the men they find most appealing, saying “I’ll take him – I want the most beautiful,” and subsequently insist the gladiators display their naked bodies, demanding “let them wear just enough for modesty.” This dialogue could be seen as an attempt to disavow or problematise the bodily display which is typical of the genre. More sexually innocent scenarios are usually established in Epic films to justify their displays of the male body, such as punishment, exercise, or bathing; in *Ben Hur* for example, Heston/Ben Hur has been made a galley slave and this ‘punishment’ is seen to explain and justify his state of semi-nudity. Spartacus himself is spared this overt sexualisation, however, as he is not chosen for his looks but his “impertinence”, which is displayed when he returns and holds the gaze of one of the Roman matrons during the inspection, thus saving the film’s hero from explicitly confronting such an emasculating scenario.

What is being tested by the narrative of *Spartacus* in the gladiatorial bout is not just the character’s strength, which is what the Romans are interested in, and betting on, but also his humanity. This has been explicitly questioned by the film’s narrative since Spartacus defiantly declared, “I’m not an animal” in a previous scene. His humanity is again challenged by the dehumanising treatment he receives from the Roman matrons. Comradeship between at least some of the gladiators has been established in previous scenes, but so has Spartacus’ temper and propensity to violence. So, although what is most obviously being tested in the subsequent scene is Spartacus’ courage and skill as a fighter, which the audience would expect him to display as the Epic protagonist, the more important test is of his humanity. This dilemma is explicitly raised in two preceding scenes: when Draba rejects Spartacus’ friendly overtures with the explanation “gladiators don’t make friends... if we’re ever matched in the arena together I’ll have to kill you,” and then later when Spartacus and Crixus, who *have* become friends, discuss what they would do if they found themselves facing each other in the arena, Spartacus tells his friend “yes, I’d kill. I’d try to stay alive and so would you.” The test raised by this scenario,

therefore, is whether he will kill his opponent for the entertainment of the Roman onlookers and dehumanise himself in the process.

In the testing scene from *Ben Hur* a similar mental and physical struggle is played out. Like Spartacus, Ben Hur has been condemned to a life of slavery for resisting the power of Rome. His resistance can be seen as more nuanced and political than Spartacus's, however, as his crime was to refuse to name anti-Roman Jews to the Roman governor. At the point at which Ben Hur is exposed to an inspection process he has been condemned to slavery in the Roman galleys and is chained to his oar. Both Spartacus and Ben Hur find themselves serving Rome in different but equally humiliating ways. Ben Hur's exceptional strength and resilience is emphasised when the Roman fleet's new commander Arrius, in a sequence that mirrors the inspection and selection process in *Spartacus*, appears below decks to inspect the galley slaves. During this inspection Ben Hur is the only slave Arrius directly addresses because, the editing of the sequence suggests, he is the only slave bold enough to hold and return Arrius' look (although the fact that he addresses him by his seat number, "41," shows that Arrius still sees Ben Hur as a slave and not fully human). Arrius is obviously impressed and intrigued that Ben Hur has survived in the galleys for three years, and this interest is only increased when he tests Ben Hur's reaction to being whipped. As Arrius himself puts it, Ben Hur's reaction shows that he has "the spirit to fight back but the good sense to control it." In the sequence that follows then, Arrius can be seen to be physically testing the galley slaves to see how fit they are, but also mentally testing Ben Hur to see how far he can be pushed and still exercise the necessary self-control to stay alive. Ben Hur's ability to resist, without giving an excuse for his death, is what is being tested here.

Steve Neale also identified another key component of such testing scenes:

The chariot races and combats, displays of physical power and/or strength, always take place in a narrative context in which they are subject to the controlling gaze of a representative, or representatives, of whatever Ancient State Power happens to be in charge.<sup>443</sup>

Both these sequences display the features of such typical Epic scenes: they are both motivated as displays of power, for example, as Arrius is not only displaying his power over the slaves but also over

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<sup>443</sup> Neale, S. (1980) *Genre* (London: British Film Institute), 35.

the other Romans in his command who are shown watching anxiously throughout the scene. This is emphasised by close-ups of one of the subordinate Roman commanders looking increasingly concerned, which are repeatedly edited into the rowing sequence. These close-ups also make it clear that Arrius' testing of the galley slaves is unusually cruel and harsh. There are two similarly anxious onlookers in the scene from *Spartacus* – the slave girl Varinia, who is in love with Spartacus, and the owner of the gladiatorial school, who is not keen to see his valuable property wasted in a private match. In this case it is the senator Crassus who is displaying his power, in particular to his Roman friends for whom he has arranged the match. The Roman matrons also display their power when they select the gladiators for the bout. They are also portrayed as more (sadistically) interested in the fighting and the deaths of the gladiators than their accompanying spouses who, in contrast, recline at the back of their balcony and discuss politics during the bouts. Both sequences contain extensive use of point-of-view sequences which emphasise the controlling gaze of these representatives of Roman power. Perhaps it should also be noted here that in both sequences that gaze is either punished or disappointed. In *Spartacus* the voyeuristic viewers are assaulted first by having a javelin thrown at them and then by one gladiator attempting to climb into their viewing box and attack them. In *Ben Hur*, the battle of wills is played out through a series of shot/reverse shots in which Heston/Ben Hur triumphs as Arrius is the first to look away, thus fulfilling the genre demands of the triumph of the hero.

### **Pro-filmic Interventions**

#### **1 Star Image/Persona**

The similarities Douglas and Heston's star images share were delineated earlier in this chapter when explaining their selection as suitable stars for commutation. It is the differences in what they brought to their roles pro-filmically, however, which will be investigated now as commutation testing demands a consideration of the effect of their substitution to the overall sense and meaning of a text. The key focus for any discussion of the results of this substitution, however, is not so much what differences may be exposed by this substitution but which of them can be seen to affect the overall meaning of the film text and how. For example, the effect of substitution on the level of physical features is to highlight the class and racial significations embodied by their star figures. One of the most striking differences in the two stars' appearance is their respective height; Heston is clearly taller than Douglas, who is only

of average height.<sup>444</sup> His regular features are also more conventionally handsome than Douglas' more hooked nose and jutting jaw. Ethnically, Douglas was the son of Jewish Eastern European immigrants whilst Heston's parents were long-settled WASP types, and Douglas' New York accent also marked him as having an urban and working-class (or blue-collar) background, unlike Heston's more neutral accent. These features of their star figures can be linked to key aspects of the characterisation of Ben Hur and Spartacus respectively. Spartacus is born a slave and remains one, as far as the Romans are concerned, throughout the film, whereas Ben Hur is a prince of Judah and is adopted as a high-ranking Roman citizen.

The aristocratic association that Heston embodies can thus be seen to be related to his commanding height and noble features, just as Douglas' stockier build and rougher face mark him as more plebeian. They also have different eye colours; Douglas has brown eyes, Heston's are blue, the significance of which in conveying a sense of Heston/Ben Hur's natural superiority shouldn't be underestimated. Heston/Ben Hur's blue eyes were considered so significant to the film's moral symbolism that Stephen Boyd, as his antagonist Messala, was made to wear brown contact lenses in contrast.<sup>445</sup> The assumptions of racial superiority underlying such decisions are unmistakeable. These pro-filmic differences may explain the seemingly ironic casting decision that denied the Jewish Douglas the role of Ben Hur, for although the character was Jewish he was also a prince, and Heston's physical appearance (height, handsomeness and blue eyes) led to him being repeatedly cast as noble and aristocratic characters in Epic films. Similarly, casting Douglas as the slave revolutionary may have been influenced by his more plebeian persona.

## 2 The Star Body as/in Mise-en-Scène

Both stars' semi-naked bodies are on display to the film audience during these sequences; Douglas/Spartacus' is also explicitly on display for an onscreen audience, appearing as he does in front of Roman spectators. The gladiatorial combat takes place in a brightly lit arena, surrounded by a wooden palisade, the floor of which is light sand. Often in the fight one or other of the gladiators, most often Spartacus, finds themselves with their back against this barrier. This works as a visual reminder

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<sup>444</sup> Although a male star's actual height can be as difficult to discover as a female star's real age, for similar reasons, Heston was regularly reported to be 6' 3" and Douglas six inches shorter at 5' 9".

<sup>445</sup> Cyrino, M. S. (2005) *Big Screen Rome* (London: Blackwell Publishing), 75.

that they are slaves and prisoners for whom there is no way out of the arena without one of them dying first. Heston/Ben Hur's body, in contrast to Douglas/Spartacus', is not on explicit display in the diegesis of *Ben Hur*. He is out of public view, below decks, in the gloomily lit Roman galley. There is also little colour or visual interest in the mise-en-scène of the galley surrounding him, which is characterised by a limited pallet of browns, whites and blacks. This contrast in visual display is also evident in the use of other figures in the mise-en-scène as there are just two gladiators standing out in the brightly lit arena in the sequence from *Spartacus* whereas Heston/Ben Hur is only one figure amongst rows and rows of other slaves. Heston/Ben Hur's lack of status and visibility is also highlighted by the sequence's establishing long shot in which Heston's figure is initially indistinguishable amongst the other galley slaves. This is also emphasised by the way in which whenever Heston/Ben Hur appears in closer shots later in the sequence, he is always framed with other slaves around him. All these aspects of the mise-en-scène can be seen to work to disavow any display of his body in contrast to the explicit display of Douglas'.

### 3 The Star Body and/as Costume

As Naremore has pointed out, nudity can usually be regarded as the final adornment "precisely because bodies are *fashionable*, or shaped by a specific culture and circumstances" [italics in original].<sup>446</sup> In this way the body shape of the two stars can also be considered under the heading of costume and as Naremore's insight would lead us to expect, their body shapes do reflect the fashion of the time. As Steve Cohan points out "the tanned and oiled body was a convention of both bodybuilding and the cinema, specific to the codes of fifties representation" and both stars' bodies conform to these codes.<sup>447</sup> The actual costume of both stars, whilst allowing for a similar level of display of their built bodies, also nevertheless emphasises the contrast between their positions. Heston/Ben Hur's body-revealing costume is a ragged, dirty white loin-cloth tied around his waist. It sits lower on his waist than Douglas' and in many shots, where Heston is framed at waist level, it is hardly visibly at all. He also wears exactly the same costume as the other slaves, reminding us of the tyrannical Roman denial of his individuality. He does however have one item of personalised decoration: leather or cloth bracelets

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<sup>446</sup> Naremore, J. (1990) *Acting in the Cinema* (London: University of California Press), 90-91.

<sup>447</sup> Cohan, S. (1997) *Masked Men: Masculinity and Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 188.

can be seen on his left wrist, suggesting some attempt at asserting his individuality and visually signifying his difference from the rest of the slaves.

Douglas/Spartacus is wearing an equally scanty costume but that is where the similarity ends. His well-made and highly decorated costume includes a pair of trunks which are cut high on the waist and topped by a wide leather belt. This belt is studded with metal plates which may suggest a defensive purpose but they are also clearly decorative. This costume, by narrowing his waist, emphasises his well-built torso, and the trunks are cut high on the thigh to reveal all of his muscular legs. He also wears sandals and has chain-mail armour covering his right arm. This is held in place by a leather strap which is fastened diagonally across his chest. Unlike Heston's unmediated nudity the presence of this strap across his otherwise naked chest can be seen to emphasise this nakedness through contrast. As Kirkham and Thumim point out "clothes can sexualise men just as they can sexualise women....Indeed it is just where there is very little clothing that detail is foregrounded and becomes meaningful," and this sexualising effect is more pronounced in the details of Douglas/Spartacus' costume than those of Heston/Ben Hur's.<sup>448</sup>

### 3.1 Body Hair

There are other signs upon the bodies of the stars' that indicate whose is intended for display and whose is not. The amount and appearance of hair on his body, for example, reflects Heston/Ben Hur's abject position, whereas Douglas/Spartacus' groomed appearance is another sign that his body has been prepared for public display. Heston/Ben Hur has an unshaven face, his hair is long and unkempt and he has hair on his chest and stomach. Douglas/Spartacus, in contrast, is clean shaven; his hair is not only groomed but he wears a small lock of it tied up on his head. His chest and stomach are also clean shaven. These differences may have historical precedents, especially the gladiators' top knot, but they also carry more subtle implications about the characters and the star enactments.

Douglas/Spartacus' hair becomes less and less controlled as the fight proceeds, for example, and whilst he's caught in Draba's net it becomes wild and unruly. This can be seen as reflecting one aspect of the characterisation of Douglas/Spartacus as sharing some of the features of a wild animal.

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<sup>448</sup> Kirkham, P. and J. Thumim (1993) 'You Tarzan' in *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart), 13-14.



The presence of body hair specifically can also be seen to contribute certain key meanings to Heston/Ben Hur's Epic body which differentiates it from that of Douglas/Spartacus. It marks him as an aristocratic body and therefore one that is not intended for display. This not only contrasts him to Douglas/Spartacus' gladiator, but it also disavows the possible fascistic connotations of such a powerful aristocratic body. This 'problem' with Heston's appearance has been commented on by Mark Jancovich, who suggests that "the size and power of Heston's body, to say nothing of his chiselled face and jaw-line, can often be problems that threaten to signify the totalitarian forces of domination".<sup>449</sup> Thus Heston/Ben Hur's ungroomed hairiness, rather than connoting an animalistic or primitive body, can be seen to suggest that his is the body of an aristocrat, one that is not meant or prepared for public display – unlike that of a gladiator. Interestingly, it is the smooth-bodied and (initially) tidy-haired Douglas/Spartacus who, earlier in the narrative of *Spartacus*, has to assert "I'm not an animal." This is never in question when it comes to Heston/Ben Hur.

### Filmic Interventions

#### 1 Figure Position and Framing

Despite the abject status conveyed by the bodily appearance of Heston/Ben Hur, his towering presence and the sense of natural superiority it conveys is also emphasised by the film's cutting and framing. Indeed the contrast between his present abject position and his 'natural' superiority is one of the key visual features of the sequence. In medium close-up shots, for example, he is repeatedly framed by the figures of other galley slaves around him, their slighter build and height throwing his stature into relief. He is also the only light-haired figure among the many other slaves, which allows him to be easily identified by the viewer in long shots of the whole galley. In close shots his blue eyes also stand out more than other characters' in the surrounding gloomy mise-en-scène. In all these ways Heston/Ben Hur's particularity and superiority are signalled.

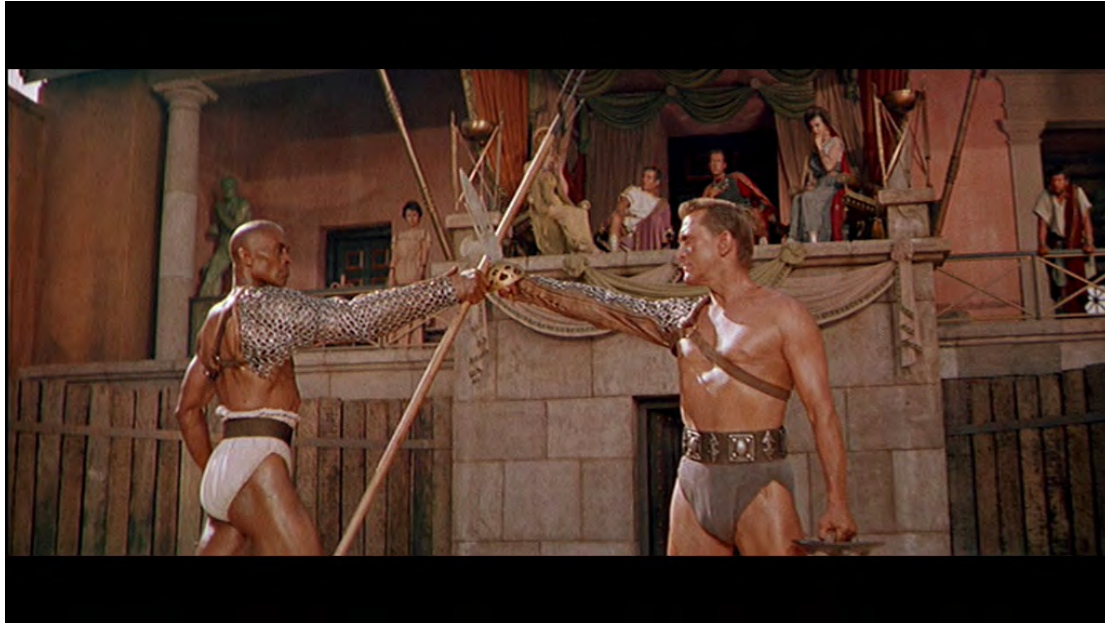
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<sup>449</sup> Jancovich, M. (2004) 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom' in Willis, A. (ed.) *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 65.



Frame 1: Heston/Ben Hur's superiority conveyed through blue eyes and blond hair as well as height and size.

Douglas/Spartacus' appearance is also explicitly visually contrasted to the character/actor he shares the frame with, but to a much different effect. In an early shot in the sequence before the bout begins, the two gladiators strike a pose in which their figures are offered up for explicit contrast by the viewer. They both step forward with opposite legs and raise opposite chain-mailed arms until Spartacus/Douglas' sword is held against Draba/Woody Strode's trident. Draba is the taller figure although Douglas/Spartacus is stockier, especially around the chest. Draba's stance is also noticeably more 'classical': he assumes an active pose in which his right leg is bent and his left leg extended. Douglas/Spartacus' less certain stance - his left arm is hanging quite loosely compared to Draba's more active bent arm, for example - means he seems less committed to the fight. Another visual suggestion that Draba is the favourite in the fight is his blackness, which seems to be being used to invoke stereotypes of the African American as belonging to a 'naturally' athletic race.

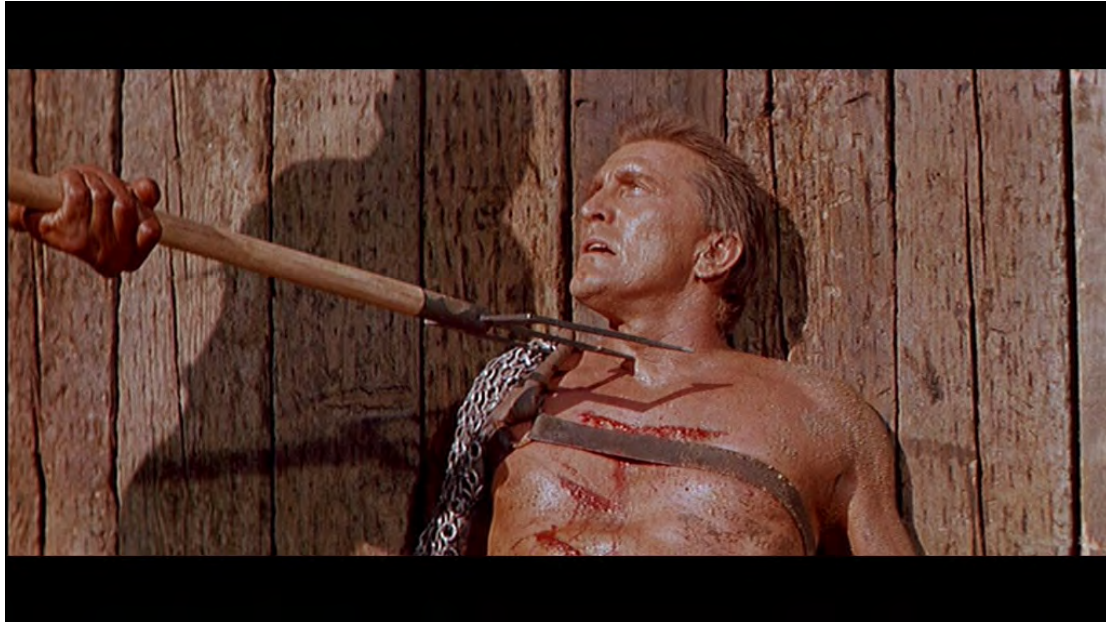


Frame 2: *Spartacus* pre-fight pose: Douglas/Spartacus is contrasted to Draba/Strode and his more 'classical' stance.

Draba's apparent readiness is also in keeping with his characterisation in the narrative so far. He explicitly rejects all friendship, or even social interaction, with the other gladiators on the grounds that they may have to kill each other one day. He has also been established as a menacing presence in the scenes directly leading up to this fight for, unlike Douglas/Spartacus and the other gladiators, he betrayed no nerves or concern as he was awaiting his turn in the arena. From the beginning then, Douglas/Spartacus' position as the underdog in this fight is well established. This is a strong contrast to the depiction of Heston/Ben Hur, whose position as the most resilient galley slave is established both through dialogue and mise-en-scène before his testing scene begins.

Other filmic interventions on the stars' bodies include the appearance on them of visible marks of their struggle during the sequence. Heston/Ben Hur becomes increasingly sweaty during his ordeal; this grows from some glints on his shoulders and arms in the earlier shots to later shots in which his entire body is shining and his hair is plastered down. In this way his physical effort and exertion is visually represented. Douglas/Spartacus, as well as becoming shiny with sweat, is also marked with three bloody cuts across his chest from his opponent's trident during their fight. These artfully placed marks run parallel to the armour strap mentioned earlier, demonstrating how costume and make-up can combine to subtle effect. His body is also marked with sand from the arena floor each time he falls, so that by the end of the sequence his body is marked with blood, sweat and dust. His more visually

marked appearance may suggest that Douglas/Spartacus' ordeal has been more challenging than Heston/Ben Hur's, which would certainly support the reading of the difference between these two star enactments as springing from the perceived invincibility of one and the more everyman status of the other.



Frame 3: Signs of exertion: blood, sweat and sand mark Douglas/Spartacus' body.



Frame 4: Marks of effort on Heston/Ben Hur's body, also note chin-down, eyes-up glare.

The analytical category of props bridges the distinction between pro-filmic and filmic interventions imposed up until now in this analysis. That these theatrical objects are usually provided by production staff before filming starts means they fall into the area of the pro-filmic, but once they are interacted with by the star performer they can be seen to enter into the realm of filmic interventions. At this point they become what Naremore, after Pudovkin, describes as 'expressive objects'. For Naremore this category shift from prop to expressive object occurs "when the human subject and the theatrical object come into contact in that indefinite realm . . . where no exact limit can be drawn between them".<sup>450</sup>

What Naremore finds interesting about such objects, and what will be considered in this analysis, is the way the star performer keeps such objects "under expressive control, letting them become signifiers of feeling".<sup>451</sup> Douglas/Spartacus, for example, is equipped with only a short sword and a very small

shield in contrast to his opponent, who has a long trident and net. It is significant that

Douglas/Spartacus is given the more defensive weapons and that he quite often holds them close to his body, as this adds to the sense we have of his disadvantage against Draba. During the fight

Douglas/Spartacus eventually loses both these items, the shield first and then his sword, which builds up the sense of his inevitable defeat. Indeed, once he has lost his shield, he often splays out his left

hand emphasising its emptiness. We also see him caught in Draba's net and later tripped up by it. He

is even filmed *through* the net at one point, his interaction with this key prop adding to the sense of him as a hunted animal.

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<sup>450</sup> Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 85.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.





Frame 5: Douglas/Spartacus crouching lower in the frame and with shieldless hand splayed.

Heston/Ben Hur has no weapons. He has instead the symbol of his enslavement, his oar. He is seen keeping firm hold of this prop with both hands throughout the galley sequence. This is in itself significant and a direct contrast to Douglas/Spartacus who, in a visual sign of his defeat, ends his test holding nothing. Heston/Ben Hur is also visually contrasted in his successful completion of his test to the rest of the slaves in the galley who, at the command of rest, let go of their oars and collapse in exhaustion, whilst he maintains his straight-armed hold. The invincibility of Heston/Ben Hur is thus conveyed through his interaction with this key prop. This feature of his enactment is slightly ambiguous, however, as the oar to which he is chained represents his enslavement and degradation, yet by the end of the sequence he has transformed it into a symbol of his strength of character and invincibility. The ambiguity of Ben Hur's relationship to the Roman Empire, which throughout the film both degrades and honours him, is hinted at here.

### 3 Evocative Facial Expressions

Naremore has described how, in contrast to the demands of theatrical performance, "in most films, actors need to produce vivid expressions in brief shots," and this is what was required in the two star enactments in the sequences presently being analysed.<sup>452</sup> They are both rapidly edited action sequences, with most shots lasting no longer than a few seconds, in which the star's face has to

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 63.

portray vivid emotions to the viewer. How one reads these facial expressions, however, is a more contentious interpretive issue; Naremore seems to underplay the contribution of the star performer when he suggests that:

Expression is polysemous, capable of multiple signification; its meaning in a film is usually narrowed and held in place by a controlling narrative, a context that can rule out some meanings and highlight others. As a result . . . it is commonplace to see dogs, babies and rank amateurs who seem as interesting as trained thespians.<sup>453</sup>

Other writers have argued for the significance of the agency behind the meaning conveyed by film performers' expressions and gestures, however, as was discussed in Chapter Two. Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke, using terminology from Prague School semiotics, designate these features 'evocative ostensive signs' and argue, against Naremore, that "the surrounding cinematic elements *do not* infuse the gestures with meaning. Instead they help to delimit the possible meanings conveyed by evocative ostensive signs" [my italics].<sup>454</sup> The independent legibility of facial expressions is also suggested by Heath's description of them in his category of *moments, intensities* as "gestures and expressions present in the film representations, *evocative in themselves*" [my italics].<sup>455</sup> However much latent meaning we want to allow such expressions and gestures, their role in spectator engagement with film cannot be denied. As Naremore himself acknowledges, "one of the common pleasures of moviegoing derives from our feeling that an actor is doing something remarkable".<sup>456</sup> The focus in this analysis is not on apportioning agency for these evocative expressions, therefore, but on analysing what they evoke and how.

#### 4 Evocative Eyes and Mouths

The two key components for creating facial expressions are the eyes and the mouth. When considering the eyes, it is important to distinguish between both the looks *in* the character/star's eyes and the looks *at* things that they convey. Both stars enact angry looks *at* their opponents in these

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<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>454</sup> Baron, C. and S. M. Carnicke (2008) *Reframing Screen Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), 96-97.

<sup>455</sup> Heath, S. (1981) *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 178.

<sup>456</sup> Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 26.

scenes and these are emphasised through their brows also being contracted and even, sometimes, their chin being lowered. In this way they produce a look *at* that can be best described as glowering. This strongly accusatory look is mostly found in Heston's enactment, as his rowing action frequently gives him the opportunity to lower his chin in this way and look up and out at Arrius (as can be seen in frame 6). Douglas/Spartacus also produces this glaring look up at the Roman box just before he salutes its spectators. It is perhaps telling that this is a look reserved for the Roman antagonists in the sequences, as it effectively conveys who is ultimately responsible for the suffering and danger the epic hero finds himself facing.



Frame 6: Heston/Ben Hur's accusatory stare at Arrius.

As with many features of their enactments, Spartacus/Douglas produces a wider range of looks than Heston/Ben Hur. His eyes dart quickly from side to side when he is watching his opponent and he looks more wide-eyed and fearful at times when he is in danger. At the end of the sequence he also enacts one of the key looks of the Epic hero – the stare into the middle distance.<sup>457</sup> This is an action/expression which seems to evoke a character's interiority and (in Epic films) often suggests their engagement with deep and lofty ideas: in Douglas/Spartacus' case, for example, he is contemplating the significance of Draba's self-sacrifice.

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<sup>457</sup> In my own previous research into Charlton Heston's Epic roles I noted this feature repeatedly in his enactment of Epic heroes.





Frame 7: Douglas/Spartacus' stare into the middle distance signalling internal turmoil and engagement with lofty ideas.

Heston/Ben Hur's more limited range of looks includes a concerned look *at* the slave to his right, and a look *in* his eyes, which can be interpreted as determined, especially in combination with certain sets of the mouth.

Both stars' enactments can be seen to contain similar uses of the mouth as an expressive feature. The most noticeable of these is a set and determined mouth that is neither a smile nor a frown, but a straight line, hence, almost literally, Michael Wood's characterisation of the typically "straight-faced" acting style of the Epic film. 'Straight-faced' as a term may have been used metaphorically by Wood to suggest the lack of humour which is a key feature of the genre, but it's also an accurate literal description of the typical facial expressions of its protagonists. A closed straight mouth is a defining feature of Epic enactments, conveying as it does the characters' control over their bodily suffering in their refusing to cry out. We see the importance of this facial movement for conveying this in *Ben Hur* when, as his ordeal increases, Heston/Ben Hur is forced to open his mouth due to the effort and exertion but, significantly, he always then closes it again in a sign of determination and strength. Cracks in this straight face then are particularly worth noting. One such break-through expression is the grimace, in which the lips are parted only to reveal gritted teeth behind. Both stars enact this expression when their character is under serious pressure or in real danger. We see it when Douglas/Spartacus is caught in Draba's net, for example, and forced against the arena wall at trident

point; and similarly, when the pace of the rowing in *Ben Hur* has been increased to ramming speed and the other slaves are starting to crack, we see Heston/Ben Hur grimace with the effort of pulling the oar back.



Frame 8: Douglas/Spartacus grimacing and teeth baring.



Frame 9: Heston/Ben Hur with teeth bared in grimace of effort.

Although Heston/Ben Hur may not enact the range of expressions Douglas/Spartacus conveys, this is in keeping with his characterisation of Ben Hur who is at this point in the narrative both more morally certain and more driven than Spartacus. He uses one expression that conveys this very effectively and that is a wry smile he gives to Arrius even as he undergoes his gruelling ordeal. It is a supremely confident, if not to say arrogant, expression which directly challenges the power and authority of the Roman commander.



Frame 10: Heston/Ben Hur with a wry smile at Arrius.

What commutation reveals, therefore, is the way in which Douglas conveys both more tentativeness and more desperation. At his most desperate point in the fight, Spartacus/Douglas appears red in the face and wild haired. He also has to convey real fear of death and defeat and then, after Draba's death, confusion. Heston conveys more confidence and certainty through his more controlled use and range of expressions, although he does display concern for the other slaves. Heston's constant, unmoving and accusatory gaze directly at Arrius conveys many things, including his indomitability, but also his moral superiority.

## 5 Gesture/Posture

Given the nature of their activities in these sequences, the stars/characters are not called upon to perform many subtle or everyday gestures. Heston/Ben Hur grips his hands on his oar at all times and

Douglas/Spartacus is mostly wielding his weapons. We do see Heston/Ben Hur turn his head during the rowing sequence to look anxiously at the rower to his left. This swift movement conveys his concern for the other slaves quite effectively but it also suggests his awareness of the sadistic impulse behind their ordeal, as he immediately looks back at Arrius with an accusatory glare.

Douglas/Spartacus' gestures are similarly limited, as during his fight there is not much call for expressive gestures. As one would expect from such action sequences the star's postures are more expressive. One bodily position Douglas/Spartacus assumes often during the gladiatorial fight is to crouch very low (as can be seen in frame 5), ensuring he is frequently lower by a head than his opponent Draba. This position conveys his more defensive attitude during the fight and also adds to the impression of him as animal-like as he appears to be acting on instinct and very much bent on survival. This is emphasised by moments when he attacks Draba when he is crouched on his hands and knees; he is also barged to the ground at one point and continues fighting whilst lying on his back.

Although these positions may well have been encouraged by the wide-screen format, which favoured horizontal interest in the frame, they nevertheless add up to an impression of a desperate struggle for survival rather than a noble fight for important values or honour. At the end of the sequence when Douglas/Spartacus is slumped against the arena wall awaiting death, his posture is one of complete defeat. His arms are hanging loosely by his side and his shoulders are slumped. Heston/Ben Hur, in contrast, remains straight and unbending throughout his ordeal. His arms remain thrust straight out and forward on his oar even when the order to rest is given, and he repeatedly brings his body and head upright to face his antagonist.



Frame 11: Heston/Ben Hur's aristocratic endurance as he remains upright and holds the Roman gaze.

## 6 Movements/Actions

As has already been noted, Douglas/Spartacus' stance is less athletic and classical than that of his opponent, Draba. This contrast is continued during their actual fight, in which Douglas/Spartacus' sudden and desperate movements and actions continue the animalistic connotations previously mentioned. Like a street fighter or boxer he moves with jostling side steps as he and Draba circle one another, and when he does attack, he jumps and springs from a crouching position. He also tends to slash wildly with his sword as he lunges forward. One of his most successful moves against his opponent is when he punches Draba with a forceful uppercut, suggesting that he is more comfortable with hand-to-hand fighting than using weapons which demand training. His desperation and lack of skill is conveyed by how often we see him staggering backwards and at one point, when he is retreating from Draba's attack, he even trips and falls to the ground. Douglas/Spartacus also repeatedly crouches and ducks. At his final undignified moment of defeat he falls on his back and scrabbles backwards until his back is against the arena palisade. Douglas/Spartacus' jerky and ungraceful movements whilst conveying the idea of him as a cornered animal, also suggest his cunning and desperation, especially when we see him red-faced with disarrayed hair. His more plebeian values of survival and struggle are thus a strong contrast to Heston/Ben Hur's unbending aristocratic endurance. Heston/Ben Hur, as already mentioned, remains upright at his oar, and throughout the sequence the main



action/movement we see him undertaking is rowing. He employs firm movements backwards and forwards with a straight-armed rowing action and these movements are consistently controlled, rhythmic and athletic. Nevertheless we do see the effort that goes into this action, particularly on the pulling backward of the oar, when strain is evident in his movements, as well as his facial expression.

In fact *straining* can be seen as one of the key features of male stars' Epic film performance as it marries bodily display to the narrative's thematic. It is straining that tenses the muscles and thus displays them for the viewer's pleasure. Richard Dyer has commented on this aspect of visual representations of masculinity thus: "it is precisely *straining* that is held to be the great good, what makes a man a man" [italics in original].<sup>458</sup> This may explain the very common visual trope in Epic films of the suspended moment during a fight when the protagonist and his opponent strike their weapons together and strain against one another, which we see examples of in the fight sequence in *Spartacus*. But this action may also be so common as it visualises the Epic heroes' having to strain against abstract forces such as oppression and injustice as well as, or at the same time as, physically straining against actual restraint or control.



Frame 12: Key feature of Epic performance: Straining

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<sup>458</sup> Dyer, R. (1982) 'Don't Look Now – The Male Pin-up', *Screen*, 23, 3/4, 72.

The other key movement/action we see in both sequences is panting/heavy breathing which at its most extreme leads to the star's chest visibly moving up and down. This visible and sometimes audible sign of the exertion and exhaustion of the star, as well as the character they are embodying, plays a key role in the appeal of the star enactment for, as Naremore has noted, "biological symptoms are important to naturalism . . . film actors have often submitted their bodies to their roles in quite fundamental ways".<sup>459</sup> This naturalism is even more important in action sequences such as these, when spectator pleasure is predicated on the star having 'really' undergone physical effort. When Douglas/Spartacus is slumped against the arena wall with Draba's trident held to his throat, we can see his whole chest moving up and down as a visible sign of the struggle he has undergone. Similarly, once the order to rest is called in *Ben Hur*, we see Heston/Ben Hur gasping for breath and his chest rising up and down as he recovers from his ordeal. This movement is also subtly emphasised by the gentle rise and fall of his body, as he is holding onto his still moving oar.

## 7 Sound

Although neither star has dialogue in these respective sequences, they do nevertheless have sounds associated with them. These sounds mark their effort and struggle and support other aspects of their performance, such as actions and movements. They include gasps, moans, groans and laboured breathing. Although they are not included at the forefront of the sound mix, they are detectable and they do add to the overall effect of sequences based on the physical testing and exertion of the main characters. This is an aspect of both stars' performances that shares the most similarities and seems to be a key feature of such sequences and such genres. It is also an interesting feature in that it is one that does not need to be provided by the star performer and quite often can be recorded out of synchronisation and added in post-production, reminding us of the constructed nature of the enactments we are considering.

### **Epic Commutations: From Epic Performance Style to Specific Star Style**

As each stage of this analysis has revealed, the enactments of these two stars share certain features but also differ in significant ways. As has already been discussed, these similarities can be seen to belong to a generically generated performance style which will be further delineated before the

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<sup>459</sup> Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 70.

differences between the two star enactments, and what they reveal, conclude this chapter. When discussing facial expressions we have already seen how Michael Wood's characterisation of a straight-faced acting style has proved both perceptive and fruitful in identifying a key feature of the genre's performance style. The other descriptive terms applied to Epic performances that seem particularly apt after the above analysis are 'monumentality' and 'sublimity'. In these sequences monumentality emerges as not just a product of the figures of these stars' bodies, although their well-built and displayed bodies contribute to that effect. It is also a product of the stances, gestures and poses struck, as for example, at the opening of the gladiatorial bout in *Spartacus* when the two gladiators dramatically remove their cloaks and display their bodies standing still for inspection whilst saluting the Roman box. The monumentality of Heston's performance is most clearly displayed at the end of the sequence when he remains upright and unbending at the end of his ordeal, but could also be discerned in his visually marked taller and nobler presence throughout. The lack of dialogue in both sequences is also worth considering as a feature of monumentality, which is conveyed by physical presence rather than vocal expression.

Sublimity is already present in the films' characters, both of whom can be seen to "stand high above others by reasons of nobility or grandeur of character"; it is also a product of the films' form and genre as they "express lofty ideas in a grand and elevated manner".<sup>460</sup> The way a sense of the sublime is conveyed by actual performance is a product of its intended effect. The effect of the sublime is said to be "that of affecting the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; calculated to inspire awe, deep reverence or lofty emotion by reason of its beauty or grandeur".<sup>461</sup> Heston's enactment may seem to fit this description more neatly, especially when one considers that the irresistible power of Ben Hur is clear throughout the sequence, whereas Spartacus is quite often in danger and is saved by Draba's act of self-sacrifice, rather than his own power. Nevertheless beauty and grandeur are conveyed by both enactments through the visual presentation of the stars within the mise-en-scène and in action. The aspect of the sublime that is most evoked in both enactments, however, is the act of rising above the merely physical. This is perhaps the key note of the Epic film, a

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<sup>460</sup> Definition no. 6, "Of language, style, or a writer: Expressing lofty ideas in a grand and elevated manner." (1989) *Oxford English Dictionary: Second edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), online version September 2011 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/192766?rskey=IHTfsO&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

<sup>461</sup> "Sublime", definition no. 7, OED, *ibid*.



genre in which the hero invariably suffers and often dies for the sake of an ideal. In these two sequences we see sublimity conveyed in two key performance features. One of these is the stare into the middle distance: an action/expression which conveys the character's engagement with and understanding of more important concern than the mere here and now. We see it being used at the very end of the scene from *Spartacus* to convey Spartacus' growing understanding of the significance of Draba's sacrifice. The other feature is more obvious in the sequence from *Ben Hur* during which Ben Hur's determination not to be broken by Roman oppression is conveyed by his increasingly challenging looks at the Roman commander. This sublime ability to rise above physical suffering through mental strength is visually conveyed through a performance in which facial expressions conveying determination and self-control are alternated with bodily movements conveying exhaustion and pain.

Despite the demands of the genre for a certain style of performance, key differences also emerge from this commutation which allows for a more precise delineation of the specific features of Heston's Epic performance. Heston's nudity for example is motivated by different forces than that of Spartacus'. Rather than deliberately prepared for public display it is typical of the Heston star enactment that his exposed body is a result of punishment or injury. This aspect of his exposed body is emphasised by the presence of body hair which is not the case for Spartacus who has a shaved body. The fact that Heston's body is not meant for display, unlike Douglas/Spartacus', is linked to his more aristocratic presence, including his blue eyes, towering height, and classical profile. These features mean Heston/Ben Hur always stands out in the frame more markedly than Douglas/Spartacus. From a narrative point of view it is significant that Ben Hur triumphs over the forces of Roman oppression alone, unlike Spartacus who is saved by Draba. This self-sufficiency in Ben Hur's character is emphasised by the fact that his body is less visibly marked by signs of effort and struggle at the end of the testing sequence than Spartacus'. Heston/Ben Hur's ability to maintain control of key props also suggests his ambiguous relationship to Roman power and foreshadows the grudging respect he is subsequently offered by representatives of Roman power, another major difference that can be linked to the specificities of his enactment. A key feature of Heston/Ben Hur's expressions in this sequence is the way that they convey him repressing his anger, especially through his glowering eyes, but also through his grimace. Spartacus' emotions are more mixed and certainly convey fear and wildness which are never present in Ben Hur. Heston/Ben Hur's more morally certain and driven characterisation is also reflected in his upright and defiant posture throughout the sequence in contrast

to Douglas/Spartacus' more vulnerable crouching and scrambling; indeed, Heston's immovability makes him a more monumental figure than Douglas.

Many of these differences can be linked to the Heston aesthetic that was discerned through the analyses in the last three chapters, especially the aristocratic significance of Heston. If, as Mourlet suggests, Heston embodies the Nietzschean *Übermensch* or superman, Douglas/Spartacus surely embodies its opposite, the quotidian everyman. The problem of Heston's classical and possibly fascistic body is also apparent in this sequence which emphasises how it is not meant for display in order to disavow these connotations. One of the key significances of Heston's enactment, his pent-up anger, also dominates his enactment and produces many of its key differences. This modified version of the commutation test has thus proved an effective method for isolating and discussing the specific features of the star enactment whilst allowing for the importance of key contextual factors to be acknowledged. The next chapter will consider how the star aesthetic that has been isolated in this way can be further delineated through a further diachronic set of contexts.

## Six Isolating the Star Aesthetic II: Star and Genre / Star in Genre

*The star in his/her films must always be read as a dramatic presence which is predicated by, and which intervenes in, enormously complex and elaborate themes and motifs, and thereby refers us to a particular state of the social reality of genre, and of the relation between the genres. – Andrew Britton<sup>462</sup>*

The commutation test of Chapter Five has proved an effective method for revealing the meanings and effects that Charlton Heston's star aesthetic contributes to a film. It could still be argued, however, that due to its focus on only one sequence from one film this is a limited approach. In order to draw wider conclusions about the meanings and effects of Heston's star enactments it will be necessary to analyse his appearances in a wider range of films. To undertake such a wider survey immediately raises two methodological issues: what criteria should be used for selecting a group of films, and how should they be analysed once selected?

### Star Vehicles

One possible selection criteria would be to focus on those films that can be considered 'star vehicles'. Such films would be useful in delineating the star aesthetic further, as Richard Dyer claims that in such films:

As with genres proper, one can discern . . . continuities of iconography (e.g. how they are dressed, made-up and coiffed, performance mannerisms, the settings with which they are associated), visual style (e.g. how they are lit, photographed, placed within the frame), and structure (e.g. their role in the plot, their function in the film's symbolic pattern).<sup>463</sup>

The category of star vehicle therefore, seems to offer a set of films to study and supplies a method with which to study them; which films actually qualify as vehicles is less clear cut however. Aware that 'vehicle' is an industry-derived term, not an academic one, Dyer suggests it implies the following processes:

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<sup>462</sup> Britton, A. [1998] (1991) 'Stars and Genre' in Gledhill, C. (ed.) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge).

<sup>463</sup> Dyer, R. (1998) [1979] *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing), 62.

[Such] films were often built around star images. Stories might be written expressly to feature a given star, or books might be bought for production with a star in mind. Sometimes alterations to the story might be effected in order to preserve the star's image.<sup>464</sup>

Dyer doesn't provide any concrete examples of such star vehicles, or give more detailed evidence of how they were produced, which may make applying the term less than precise. In his discussion of "two Garbo vehicles then in the works" at MGM, however, Thomas Schatz does provide an example of how such vehicles were conceived and produced. He reveals how the studio producer Irving Thalberg

Worked with different supervisors and writing teams on the two Garbo projects to vary her characterisation, but he ensured consistent production values by putting [the same] director and . . . Garbo's personal cameraman, on both pictures.<sup>465</sup>

This evidence suggests that the nature of the star vehicle may be more complex than Dyer's formulation suggests. It would appear, for example, that although efforts were made to ensure the iconography and visual style of the star remained consistent, the established 'structure' of the star's roles was less rigidly adhered to. Indeed, as Schatz's comments make clear, the vehicle may be designed to vary the star's roles, and therefore image, as much as to reinforce it. There is another problem with using the category of the star vehicle in a study of Charlton Heston, however, which is an uncertainty about how far the term can be applied to films produced under conditions other than the highly controlled and planned production methods of the studio system.

### **Star and Genre: A Framework for Analysis**

In his essay 'Stars and Genre,' Andrew Britton questions some of the more simplistic assumptions about the relationship between star and genre through a teasing out of the different possible meanings brought to any one film by these two different signifying structures.<sup>466</sup> In contrast to Dyer's argument that "in certain respects a set of star vehicles is rather like a film genre," Britton argues that "it is

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

<sup>465</sup> Schatz, T. (1998) *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (London: Faber and Faber), 109-110.

<sup>466</sup> Britton, A. [1998] (1991) 'Stars and Genre' in Gledhill, C. (ed.) *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge), 198-206.

precisely because [a star's] films are not 'like' a genre but embedded in one that we can specify what [the star's] effect is".<sup>467</sup> As this point makes clear, one cannot ignore the contribution of generic elements to a film role's meaning and effects and it is important therefore not to ascribe such aspects too readily to the star's presence. Britton acknowledges that "any set of star vehicles reveals recurrent thematic and stylistic features whose particular operation and development are indeed determined by the presence of the star."<sup>468</sup> He nevertheless goes on to emphasise that, in seeking to discriminate between what the genre demands and what the star offers, it is important to remain concurrently aware of the thematic and stylistic features of the genre in which that star appears.

Britton also warns that "it is as dangerous to compartmentalise stars as it is to hive off the genres".<sup>469</sup> This highlights the importance of comparing those thematic and stylistic features that are ascribed to the presence of the star, with those which are discernible in the enactments of other stars, to ensure that what one identifies is specific to that star and not part of the wider context of performance and/or narrative conventions in operation at the film's moment of production. This timely warning is borne out by an example from Naremore's work in which he draws attention to one particular gesture of James Stewart's. Naremore confidently ascribes this gesture to "the idiolect of the performer".<sup>470</sup>

Whenever he wants to register "anguish" in a close-up he relies on a personal habit rather than a standardised expressive vocabulary. Inevitably at the point of his greatest trauma, he will raise a trembling hand to his open mouth, sometimes biting at the flesh.<sup>471</sup>

As earlier analysis has pointed out, however, the repeated use of the same gesture is also an identifiable feature of Heston's performance style in Epic films. Commenting on this specific gesture this work found that it "often allows him to bring his hand and fingers to his mouth in a recognisable gesture of self-absorption".<sup>472</sup> The repeated use of the same gesture by these two stars may thus be

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<sup>467</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 62, and Britton, 'Stars and Genre', 199.

<sup>468</sup> Britton, *ibid.*

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>470</sup> Naremore, J. (1990) *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 65.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>472</sup> Limmer, K. (2000) unpublished dissertation 'The Agony and the Ecstasy: Analysing the Beauty and Pleasure of Charlton Heston's Appearance in Epic Films', 30.

due to wider trends in Hollywood performance styles rather than to star-specific interventions; it certainly cannot be as simply ascribed to the star's *idiolect* as Naremore suggests. Genre, therefore, not only offers a more objective and well-established category to select films for further consideration from, but also allows for the development of a more contextualised analysis. A detailed consideration of Charlton Heston's star enactments in films of one genre will allow for the identification of those differences which are, to paraphrase Britton's conclusion, a function of distinct, but reciprocal, interventions of the star in the genre. Using genre films offers a solution to both the methodological questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, offering criteria for selection and a method of analysis. Given that the previous chapter concentrated on the Epic film and the features of Heston's enactments within it, it seems more fruitful to now consider Heston's appearance in other genres.

This cross-genre approach should allow for more comparative conclusions to be drawn about the star aesthetic and also offer further opportunities to consider how far genre can be seen to influence performance style, particularly as Richard deCordova's important suggestion that "some genres render performance according to genre-specific rules," demands further investigation.<sup>473</sup> DeCordova suggested two ways in which further work on performance style and genre should develop:

First, there must be a close analysis of the way in which performance is structured within particular films and particular genres. Second, a more comparative approach to the problem of genre and performance needs to be taken.<sup>474</sup>

As an analysis of Epic performance style was undertaken in Chapter Five, a consideration of performance styles in other genres will allow for the beginning of just such a comparative approach, with the added benefit that focusing on the same star limits even farther the variables within such analysis.

Although most critics are no longer so confident as to the discrete nature of genres and would surely hesitate at using the word 'rules' to discuss their features, distinctive performance styles have already been identified and analysed in certain genres and deCordova's conclusion that "the examination of

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<sup>473</sup> DeCordova, R. (1995) 'Genre and Performance: An Overview' in Barry Keith Grant (ed.) *Genre Reader II*, (Austin: University of Texas Press), 129.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

the ways that different genres circumscribe the form and position of performance in film is an important and underdeveloped area of genre studies” remains the case.<sup>475</sup> Interestingly, the features that deCordova suggests such an examination should focus on are:

Lighting, framing, camera movement, and the close-up, [which] ally themselves with the body of the actor and work to produce effects of performance. These forms of alliance need to be described more carefully and their generic features delineated.<sup>476</sup>

He can thus be seen to identify similar areas to Dyer, who suggested that iconography and visual style need to be analysed in order to identify signs of the star’s intervention in the film genre. If an investigation has already delineated the generic elements of such stylistic features, it will be able to identify and analyse the visual ‘forms of alliance’ between star and genre with confidence. As well as visual or stylistic features, Britton and Dyer suggest that the thematic concerns of a genre also have to be identified to allow those aspects of the star’s “role in the plot, their function in the film’s symbolic pattern,” to be isolated more confidently.<sup>477</sup> This will allow for a more confident identification of those that are determined by the enactment of the star.

## **Heston and Genre**

Before undertaking such an analysis, however, it is important to consider Heston’s specific relationship with film genres for, as Britton also pointed out, different stars have different relationships to genre. Some stars are virtually genre specific and many repeatedly cross genres, but he suggests “it is most often the case . . . that major stars are associated simultaneously with several genres”.<sup>478</sup> Charlton Heston was indeed associated with several genres during the 1950s and early 1960s as he had appeared in six Westerns, three melodramas, two comedies and two adventure films up to that point.<sup>479</sup> The genre that nevertheless dominated his filmography at this point is the historical Epic, with

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>477</sup> Dyer, *Stars*.

<sup>478</sup> Britton, ‘Stars and Genre’.

<sup>479</sup> Westerns: *The Savage* (1952), *Pony Express* (1953), *Arrowhead* (1953), *The Far Horizons* (1955), *Three Violent People* (1956), *The Big Country* (1958); Melodramas: *Ruby Gentry* (1952), *Bad For Each Other* (1953) and

leading roles in seven films that can be confidently described in this way, and others that share some features with it.<sup>480</sup> Beyond such a purely numerical comparison, however, the cultural impact of each film has to be assessed if one is considering which genre a star was chiefly associated with. Even such a crude measure as box office would suggest that it was in roles in historical Epics that Heston made his biggest impact on the audience. The following historical and/or Epic films, for example, figured in *Variety's* annual list of top ten moneymakers for their respective years of release: *The Greatest Show on Earth* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1952), *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956), *The Big Country* (William Wyler, 1958), *The Buccaneer* (Anthony Quinn, 1959), *Ben Hur* (William Wyler, 1960), *El Cid* (Anthony Mann, 1961), *Diamond Head* (Guy Green, 1962), and *55 Days at Peking* (Nicholas Ray, 1963).<sup>481</sup> It appears, therefore, that although Heston did appear in a wide range of genres it is reasonable to suggest that throughout the late '50s and early '60s his star presence was firmly associated with the historical Epic.

From the late 1960s onwards however, roles in this genre almost vanish from Heston's filmography and in their place we can trace Heston's growing association with two newly emerging genres: the science-fiction film and the disaster movie.<sup>482</sup> Over six years he appeared in three science-fiction films (*Planet of the Apes* [Franklin J. Shaffner, 1968]; *The Omega Man* [Boris Sagal, 1971]; and *Soylent Green* [Richard Fleischer, 1973]) and four disaster movies (*Skyjacked* [John Guillermin, 1972]; *Airport 1975* [Jack Smight, 1974]; *Earthquake* [Mark Robson, 1974]; and *Two Minute Warning* [Larry Peerce, 1976]).<sup>483</sup> There is a potentially misleading tendency in star study to emphasise the similarities between all of a star's enactments and to downplay their differences, just as we may downplay the

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*Diamond Head* (1962); Comedies: *The Private War of Major Benson* (1955), *The Pigeon that Took Rome* (1962); Adventure Films: *The Naked Jungle* (1954), *The Secret of the Incas* (1953).

<sup>480</sup> Historical Epics: *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben Hur* (1959), *El Cid* (1961), *55 Days at Peking* (1963), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965), *Khartoum* (1966); *The Big Country* (1958) was an Epic Western and *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952) had many features of Epic form but a contemporary setting.

<sup>481</sup> As reprinted in Cobbett Steinberg (1981) 'Annual Top Moneymaking Films' in *Reel Facts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd), 427-446. Although *The Buccaneer* was a historical Epic, Charlton Heston did not take a leading role in it and so it wasn't included in note 480's list.

<sup>482</sup> His supporting role as Cardinal de Richelieu in *The Three Musketeers* (Richard Lester, 1973) and its sequel *The Four Musketeers* (Richard Lester, 1974) could be seen as his last appearances in a box-office hit in this genre.

<sup>483</sup> It could be four science-fiction films if one counts his cameo appearance in *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (Ted Post, 1970). Mark Jancovich also cites *Gray Lady Down* (David Greene, 1978) as a disaster movie.



similarities between different stars and emphasise their differences to one another. To guard against this tendency and to investigate the differences as well as the similarities between Heston's star enactments, this chapter, therefore, will investigate his appearance in these two key genres of 1960s and '70s Hollywood.

### **Transitional Genres: Transitional Stardom**

Institutional factors affecting the forms of stardom cannot be ignored, as was demonstrated when considering the usefulness of the category of star vehicles. From an institutional perspective Charlton Heston, rising to stardom in the 1950s and fading from box-office hits in the late 1970s, could be described as a 'transitional' star. Although it may seem a little distorted to describe a thirty-year period of Hollywood's history as merely transitional, the period between the 1920s-1940s studio system and the 1980s, '90s and '00s New Hollywood, is generally seen by film historians as one of transition between these two modes of production.<sup>484</sup> Mark Jancovich has commented on how Heston's own relationship to Hollywood institutions during this period marked him as a transitional star when he suggests that "Heston's contract represented an early stage in the dismantling of the studio system".<sup>485</sup> Rather than signing an exclusive contract with a studio, Heston signed a non-exclusive contract with an independent producer, Hal Wallis.<sup>486</sup> His contractual arrangements, therefore, can be seen to place Heston at an evolutionary position between the permanently contracted studio stars of the classic Hollywood system and the free-agent, or more precisely agent-represented, film stars of today.

The science-fiction and disaster movie genres which will be the focus of this chapter have been identified in a similar way as 'transitional'. They are identified as new genres that rose to prominence during this transitional period in response to the changing production methods and audience profile which emerged from the late 1950s onwards. Barry Longford argues that "science fiction has a good claim to be considered the first distinctively post-classical Hollywood genre, and as such [it] occupies

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<sup>484</sup> Especially when one considers that the studio system only lasted for that long itself and the 'New Hollywood' hasn't been around much longer. In his influential essay 'The New Hollywood' in J. Collins, H. Radner and A. Preacher Collins (eds.) (1993) *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (London: Routledge) for example, Thomas Schatz uses the subheading *Hollywood in Transition* when discussing this period.

<sup>485</sup> Jancovich, M. (2004) 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom: Spectacle and Performance in the Development of the Blockbuster' in Willis, A. (ed.) *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 52.

<sup>486</sup> Heston, C. (1996) *In the Arena: The Biography* (London: Harper Collins), 92.

an important place in industry history,” because of its relative scarcity as a genre production during the studio period.<sup>487</sup> Steven Keane similarly suggests that “disaster movies of the early to mid-1970s can be regarded as transitional in several important respects” in particular their successful deployment of big stars and big explosions.<sup>488</sup>

### **Heston and the Blockbuster**

The seemingly analogous relationship between the key features of Heston’s star career and Hollywood’s post-Paramount development has been discussed in detail by Mark Jancovich in his essay ‘Charlton Heston is an Axiom’, and it is important to acknowledge as well as challenge the conclusions he has drawn from this overview.<sup>489</sup> The first feature of Heston’s career that Jancovich identifies as axiomatic is his appearance in so-called blockbuster films, and it is true that the term blockbuster was first used in Hollywood in the early 1950s, just as Heston’s career was starting.<sup>490</sup> But Jancovich’s misunderstanding of the differing institutional and critical uses of the term blockbuster in different production contexts is revealed when he suggests that:

Heston’s association with the blockbuster is particularly interesting given that, despite the critical derision which is often directed at it by critics, Heston himself . . . has actually been able to distance himself from its more negative associations.<sup>491</sup>

Far from receiving ‘critical derision’ however, the blockbusters of the 1950s and ’60s were prestige productions, regularly receiving both critical acclaim and Academy Awards. Jancovich appears to have assumed that the critical reputation of contemporary New Hollywood blockbusters applied equally to these earlier films, unaware that, as Neale points out, “one of the hallmarks of the New Hollywood era is that blockbusters and prestige are no longer as synonymous as they were”.<sup>492</sup> As Jancovich doesn’t define what he understands by the term blockbuster, such misreadings are perhaps inevitable. In their

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<sup>487</sup> Longford, B. (ed.) (2005) *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 184.

<sup>488</sup> Keane, S. (2001) *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (London: Wallflower Press), 49.

<sup>489</sup> Jancovich, ‘Charlton Heston is an Axiom’, *ibid.*

<sup>490</sup> Neale, S. (2003) ‘Hollywood Blockbusters: Historical Dimensions’ in J. Singer (ed.) *Movie Blockbusters*, (London: Routledge), 47-60.

<sup>491</sup> Jancovich, ‘Charlton Heston is an Axiom’, 51-2.

<sup>492</sup> Neale, ‘Hollywood Blockbusters’, 58 (note 14).

analyses of the Hollywood blockbuster, however, both Neale and Thomas Schatz offer well-researched and supported criteria to help identify the features of this form of film production in the 1950s and '60s. Two of Neale's defining criteria - that such films were both more expensive and longer than the average feature (the third is that they use the latest technologies) - remind us that *blockbuster* is in many ways a relative term.<sup>493</sup> As Julian Stringer notes, an "important aspect of the blockbuster's extra dimensions or superlative nature is its perceived difference from mainstream or normal cinema".<sup>494</sup> Reminding us of their high critical status Schatz comments that:

The biopics, historical and biblical epics, literary adaptations, and transplanted stage musicals of the 1950s and 1960s differed from the prestige pictures of the classical era only in their oversized budgets, casts, running times, and screen width.<sup>495</sup>

In this description Schatz refers to the same defining features which Neale identified and adds the criterion of large casts. Jancovich seems to have applied solely this last criterion however, when he conflates the description "Big all-star picture" with blockbuster. Using Neale's three defining features of the transitional blockbusters, however, it is clear that Jancovich has been a little too liberal in applying the term to many of Heston's films produced during this period, such as *Diamond Head* and *Skyjacked*, although it fits others. *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben Hur* can most unproblematically be described as blockbusters, indeed they are both cited as examples of the trend by Neale and Schatz, but no other Heston films are referred to by either of them in their discussions. Most of the films Jancovich cites certainly had big budgets, big casts and/or big box-office success but not in the superlative sense that blockbuster implies, and *The War Lord* (Franklin J. Shaffner, 1965) did not have a big budget or a big cast, nor did it achieve big success at the box office.<sup>496</sup>

Whilst the features of the blockbuster identified by Schatz and Neale relate to its production context there is another meaning implied by the label blockbuster as it is used "to refer on the one hand to

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<sup>493</sup> "All of them were expensive, at least three times the cost of the average Hollywood feature... Nearly all of them were longer", *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>494</sup> Stringer, J. (ed.) (2003) 'Introduction' in *Movie Blockbusters* (London: Routledge), 8.

<sup>495</sup> Schatz, T. (1993) 'The New Hollywood', 21.

<sup>496</sup> Although even the all-star cast is questionable in the case of *Diamond Head* (Guy Green, 1962) in which the leading actors are Yvette Mimieux, George Chakiris and James Darren.

large-scale productions and on the other to large-scale box-office hits".<sup>497</sup> The first of Heston's science-fiction films, *Planet of the Apes*, certainly achieved blockbuster status at the box office, ranking sixth in the *Variety* poll for 1968 and taking an estimated \$15 million in rentals.<sup>498</sup> Its budget was also considerable, although it had to be nearly halved before the production company could secure funding.<sup>499</sup> But to describe *The Omega Man* and *Soylent Green* as sci-fi blockbusters, as Jancovich does, is to stretch the application of the term beyond credibility. These films were undoubtedly major Hollywood productions but their budgets and audiences were in no way superlative and they also display fairly average production values – *Soylent Green* being filmed entirely on the MGM studio backlot, for example, despite being set in New York.<sup>500</sup> Similarly, although of the disaster movies, *Earthquake* and *Airport 1975* had substantial budgets, casts and in the case of *Earthquake* the latest special effects, it is not reasonable to describe either *Skyjacked* or *Two Minute Warning* as blockbusters, due to their smaller budgets and lower-key casts.<sup>501</sup>

Jancovich's over-application of the term blockbuster to Heston's films should not detract, however, from his key role in many examples of this new form of production and its implications for his star figure. There are many possible reasons for this association, but the key one for Jancovich is his physical presence, and this is indeed a widespread critical and popular idea about Heston and genre.<sup>502</sup> Conflating his star figure with action stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone as Jancovich does however, is as mistaken as conflating transitional blockbusters with the New Hollywood version. Far from Heston "signifying a kind of prototype of the spectacular action hero of which Schwarzenegger is only a newer incarnation," Schwarzenegger's star prototype would be more

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<sup>497</sup> Neale, 'Hollywood Blockbusters', 47.

<sup>498</sup> Steinberg, C. (1981) *Reel Facts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), 441.

<sup>499</sup> No-one in Hollywood or Europe was willing to risk the estimated \$10 million budget and only when that figure was reduced to \$5.8 did Fox green light the production with a \$5 million investment, according to Eric Greene in (1998) *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race, Politics and Popular Culture* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press), 2.

<sup>500</sup> This production detail is described on Richard Fleischer's DVD commentary for *Soylent Green*.

<sup>501</sup> In specially equipped cinemas *Earthquake* was exhibited with 'Sensurround,' "a special effects system developed by Universal in 1974 to enhance the impact of tremor scenes." Katz, E. (ed.) (1996) *The Macmillan International Film Encyclopedia: New Edition* (London: Macmillan), 1232.

<sup>502</sup> "He needs the blockbuster's 'visual pyrotechnics...overblown budgets...expansive landscapes' to provide a context for his presence." Jancovich, 'Charlton Heston is an Axiom', 58.

properly identified as Steve Reeves and the other bodybuilder stars of the 1950s.<sup>503</sup> Unlike Heston, these were B movie stars, just as the prototypes of the New Hollywood blockbuster are genres “which would in the past have been the province of the B film”.<sup>504</sup> The only features Heston shares with these ‘spectacular action heroes’ are height and build, but in many other key areas of representation - class, nationality, cultural capital and critical status, for example - he is as different a kind of star as it’s possible to imagine. Jancovich’s suggestion that Heston needs the spectacular setting of the blockbuster to provide a context for his presence, however, is an interesting insight into the interplay between star presence and genre, as it allows for the specificity of the star enactment, in this case Heston’s superhuman appearance, to influence the forms in which it appears.<sup>505</sup> Jancovich’s understanding of the term blockbuster, however, is too vague and all-encompassing to be of much further use in this chapter’s detailed analysis of the interaction between genre and star.

### **Action and Adventure - Charlton Heston in *The Naked Jungle***

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly given the hybrid nature of many genres, both science-fiction and disaster films share features with each other and with earlier genres in which Heston had starred. These features are highlighted by Neale when discussing the uber-genre (not his term) Action-Adventure, which he defines as consisting of “spectacular physical action, fights, chases and explosions, special effects and athletic feats and stunts, hyperbolic action and stars”.<sup>506</sup> Not only are these features common to a range of genres that Heston appears in but it is this very hyperbolic effect that often defines Heston’s star enactments.

Action-Adventure is also an interesting genre as it seems to recur throughout the history of Hollywood production (hence the description of it here as an uber-genre) and this could be used to argue against the historical specificity of certain features of these ‘transitional’ genres. Charlton Heston’s starring role in *The Naked Jungle* (Byron Haskin, 1954) marked his first appearances in an Action-Adventure film and in terms of his burgeoning career as a film star it was also, according to Heston, an “even better

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>504</sup> Neale, ‘Hollywood Blockbusters’, 52.

<sup>505</sup> Jancovich, ‘Charlton Heston is an Axiom’, 58.

<sup>506</sup> Neale (2000) *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge), 52. Although it must be acknowledged that he is referring specifically here to the Action Adventure films of the 1980s onwards.

break” than his leading role in the multi-academy award winning *The Greatest Show on Earth* in the previous year.<sup>507</sup> Heston suggests that it wasn’t until the critical and commercial success of *The Naked Jungle* that he proved he could successfully ‘open’ a film on his own: the success of *The Greatest Show on Earth*, unsurprisingly, being ascribed to its director, Cecil B. DeMille, rather than to his presence in the cast.<sup>508</sup> *The Naked Jungle* and its genre, therefore, can be seen to have played an important part in establishing some of the key features of the Heston star persona, as well as his bankability. But Heston’s own star aesthetic can be seen to have inflected the genre and its development in less obvious ways.

Set in both the romantic past (1902) and an inhospitable place (the Amazonian basin) *The Naked Jungle* adheres to Thomas Sobchack’s description of the Action-Adventure genre, indeed ‘the jungle film’ is one of the subgenres Neale identifies in his discussion of this genre.<sup>509</sup> The film manages to establish Heston’s character as sharing aspects of both of the two types of hero Sobchack identifies as occurring in this genre.<sup>510</sup> His fulfilment of the first type, “the lone hero, the lord of the jungle,” is clearly established when his character, Christopher Leiningen, declares that he took the land that forms his plantation, “out of the river and the jungle with my bare hands.” In the latter half of the film, when disaster in the form of a gigantic army of soldier ants eating everything in their path threatens, he assumes the role of Sobchack’s second type of hero: “the person who leads a group... out of danger and back to civilisation”.<sup>511</sup> In this film civilisation is represented by Leiningen’s plantation house, its symbolic function is pointed out quite literally early in the film when Heston/Leiningen warns his recently-arrived bride that civilisation stops outside its gates. This genre’s well-established links with

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<sup>507</sup> Undated recording of his lecture ‘Charlton Heston on Screen Acting’ given at the National Film Theatre, probably 1973, sourced through the BFI library.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

<sup>509</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 55 -58.

<sup>510</sup> Sobchack, T. (1988) ‘The Adventure Film’ in W.D. Gehring (ed.) *Handbook of American Film Genres* (Westport: Greenwood Press), 12.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid.

colonialism, imperialism and racism are also all displayed in this film's representations of indigenous people and through the uncritical presentation of the colonial project of its planter hero.<sup>512</sup>

Traditional ideals of masculinity which would also be expected to be present in this genre are undermined, however, by its romantic plot concerning the hero's mail-order bride.<sup>513</sup> Through the metaphors and circumlocutions that the production code made necessary, it becomes evident that Leiningen, who has been in the jungle since he was nineteen, is a virgin and his new bride, a widow, most definitely is not. This leads Leiningen to brusquely reject her and Heston/Leiningen subsequently spends a lot of screen time expressing his fear of sexual inadequacy through his violent interaction with various props, including, after one heated moment of applying anti-insect lotion to her bare shoulders, firing his pistol impotently into the jungle.<sup>514</sup>

This aspect of his role and character is important because it seems to be a possible example of the star aesthetic making an intervention in the genre. The traditional ideals of masculinity associated with this genre would lead us to expect the film's protagonist to be sexually experienced, whereas virginity and/or chastity is quite a common state for the Heston hero. In *The Ten Commandments* for example, he rejects both his Israelite wife and former Egyptian love for the sake of doing God's work; in *Ben Hur* by the time he returns to the girl he loves (but hasn't yet slept with) he is too embittered to think of anything but revenge; and in *El Cid* he manages to spend only one night with his wife before duty, and a large Spanish army, call him away and they are only reunited at his deathbed.

This is one specificity to his enactment in this film that may be ascribed to his presence and is linked in some ways to the second, his nobility. Although this film is set in South America in 1902 the role of the planter Christopher Leiningen is compared both explicitly and implicitly to that of a feudal lord. At the beginning of the film for example, the local government commissioner informs Mrs. Leiningen that on his own estate "your husband has more power than a king." This explicit description is confirmed by other scenes in which Heston/Leiningen is seen dispensing justice to the indigenous people under his

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<sup>512</sup> "Its links with colonialism, imperialism and racism, as well as with traditional ideals of masculinity, run very deep" Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 58.

<sup>513</sup> Their marriage has been undertaken by proxies before she arrives from the U.S; she was selected by the hero's brother after he advertised for a wife in a newspaper.

<sup>514</sup> There is narrative motivation for this action: he fires his gun to reveal the ominous lack of animal life in the jungle around them, but the excessive nature of this action is signalled by his unnecessarily firing it repeatedly.

control and in the film's climax where the locals retreat behind the walls of his plantation house, just as serfs would enter a castle for protection. This lordly aspect to Heston's star enactments has already been commented on and is therefore suggestive of the star aesthetic's effect on the genre's structure.

Even though "displays of the male body and of the hero's physical prowess are traditional in all kinds of adventure films," the specific way this is achieved in this film may be worth considering in more detail.<sup>515</sup> It is the case, for example, that until Mr And Mrs. Leiningen's relationship problems are solved, Heston/Leiningen's body is not displayed or exposed. In fact in one remarkable moment of role reversal, Heston/Leiningen is embarrassed to find his wife looking at him while his shirt is undone and his chest exposed. We see him hastily tuck his shirt back in, covering his body up from her gaze, which serves to reinforce his position as the less sexually experienced character. It is only at the film's climax, when Heston/Leiningen has flooded all his once-reclaimed land, that his chest is fully exposed to both the film spectator and his wife, as he staggers from the flood's muddy bank into her arms. Thus in this film, as in many others, Heston's nudity can be seen to signal vulnerability and captivity rather than power and control.

The hero's physical prowess, on the other hand, is unproblematically rendered in this film through many Action-Adventure tropes. Heston/Leiningen's domination of the landscape and its people is signified through his contrasting height and whiteness whenever he is framed standing among them and emphasised further by his frequently appearing on horseback. His travelling through the landscape, both by river and on foot, also signifies his control of the inhospitable region he inhabits. Interestingly these are also the sections of the film that include location footage of South American jungles and rivers, which add to the film's exotic sense of adventure. Editing techniques also associate him with a commanding overview of nature and the landscape. When he climbs to higher ground on the jungle expedition, it is his point-of-view shot of the distant ant army and their trail of devastation that we see. He also keeps one of the soldier ants in a jar and we see him inspecting it with a magnifying glass, cutting to an extreme close-up of the insect as he does so. The film's scopic economy thus mirrors Heston/Leiningen's control and mastery of the natural environment and its people.

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<sup>515</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 56.



In the Action-Adventure genre, as Yvonne Tasker suggests, “the narrative thrust of adventure provides a stage for action” and that action is what allows for the hero’s physical prowess to be displayed.<sup>516</sup>

*The Naked Jungle*’s most physical and spectacular action occurs in the film’s last quarter, when Heston/Leiningen defends his land against the devastating ants. There are close-up shots of other characters’ horrible deaths at the hands (or jaws) of the ants and fires and dramatic explosions as Leiningen blows up first the bridges and then finally the sluice gates that protect his land. Before he can do this however he has to venture out alone across the ant column and there is a long action sequence in which he runs and stumbles through the ants, which we see climbing all over him in frequent close-ups. This sequence is also edited at a much faster pace to create a sense of dramatic action. After successfully blowing the sluices Heston/Leiningen is then washed away in an equally spectacular flood. We then cut between shots of Heston/Leiningen struggling in the flood water and shots of the destruction of everything he has built and worked for. In these shots we see the buildings and infrastructure collapse quite quickly and spectacularly in a style that we would now recognise as typical of the disaster movie. In all these ways we can see how this film fits the Action-Adventure template and how Heston’s star enactment determines the operation and development of certain thematic and stylistic features within that genre.

### **Generic Developments and Continuities**

Rather than placing *The Naked Jungle* (1954) within the long history of the Action-Adventure genre, however, Jancovich prefers to see it as prefiguring the science-fiction and disaster movies genres and Heston’s roles in them. Although Jancovich suggests that *The Naked Jungle* was “associated with an emerging taste for SF and fantasy” the film’s similarities with the science-fiction genre are tentative to say the least.<sup>517</sup> Jancovich’s argument is based on the identity of the film’s producer, George Pal, rather than on internal evidence from the film itself.<sup>518</sup> There is no evidence offered to support his claim that this film was especially popular with the “increasingly important teenage audience,” although other SF and fantasy films may have been, nor that it was associated “with the rise of independent

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<sup>516</sup> Tasker, Y. (ed.) (2004) *Action and Adventure Cinema* (London: Routledge), 7.

<sup>517</sup> Jancovich, ‘Charlton Heston is an Axiom’, 53.

<sup>518</sup> “It was produced by George Pal . . . who *would* go on to make his name as a producer of classic science fiction” [my italics], *ibid.*, 53.

production companies such as AIP” in any other way than it was produced by the man who went on to work for that company.<sup>519</sup> Jancovich is perhaps on stronger ground when he suggests that aspects of *The Naked Jungle* prefigure the disaster movie, as we have seen. The film’s main plot corresponds to one of the eight basic types of disaster films identified by Maurice Yacowar in his essay ‘The Bug in the Rug: Notes on the Disaster Genre,’ in which he calls the kind of disaster narrative which “pits a human community against a destructive form of nature,” ‘The Natural Attack.’<sup>520</sup> Although the climactic sequence of *The Naked Jungle* can be seen to fit this description, however, the main focus of the narrative for large sections of the film is concerned with other Action-Adventure plot tropes, conforming to the narrative expectations of a genre in which “the plots . . . are usually episodic.”<sup>521</sup> Rather than considering how this film prefigures the disaster genre, then, it would be more fruitful to consider how the disaster movie genre developed from what was only one feature, albeit a long-standing one, of the Action-Adventure film.

This close consideration of Heston’s star enactment in *The Naked Jungle*, and its interventions in the features of the Action-Adventure film genre, points us towards some of the continuities between the different genres Heston appeared in and his enactments within them. It may be fruitful, therefore, to consider what other continuities may be identified in the themes and styles of the different genres that Heston’s star enactments occur within. Thomas Schatz’s binary distinction between what he calls, ‘genres of integration’ and ‘genres of order’ allows for the majority of Heston’s star enactments to be seen as belonging to the generic *mode* of order, despite his appearing in a number of different individual genres.<sup>522</sup> Schatz’ description of the role of the protagonists of the genres of order does fit the majority of Heston’s roles:

The hero mediates the cultural contradictions inherent within his milieu. Conflicts within these genres are externalised, translated into violence, and usually resolved through the elimination of some threat to the social order. . . . The hero, either through his departure or death at the

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<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> Yacowar, M. (1995) ‘The Bug in the Rug: Notes on the Disaster Genre’ in B.K. Grant (ed.) *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 261.

<sup>521</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 56.

<sup>522</sup> Schatz, T. (1981) *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 34-5.

film's end, does not assimilate the values and lifestyle of the community but instead maintains his individuality.<sup>523</sup>

Thus a star's move between roles in genres of order such as Westerns and war films may not affect the star's signification as much as one from action to romantic comedy might. The major genres that Heston has appeared in share more significant similarities, therefore, in terms of the role of the protagonist, than differences.

Andrew Britton suggests that an evolutionary movement between certain genres can be traced, however, rather than imposing such a binary categorisation. He describes "the tendency of the genres to inherit one another".<sup>524</sup> It is through this more evolutionary process that other critics have pointed out the continuities between science-fiction and disaster movies and the Epic film. Indeed, Keane suggests that these new genres were "in part filling the commercial and moral vacuum left by ancient-world epics" and comments on how they provided for continuity of spectacle.<sup>525</sup> He describes thematic and visual features common to both these genres which have also been consistently identified in Heston's star enactments, in particular, morally upright heroic characters acting within a *mise-en-scène* of visual spectacle. Ryan and Kellner also highlight the kind of heroic leading roles the disaster movie offered: "they exhibit a return to more traditional generic conventions [including] the ritualized legitimation of strong male leadership".<sup>526</sup> Hugh Ruppersberg argues in a similar way that "science fiction films of the 1970s and 1980s serve the same function as the biblical epics of the 1950s and 1960s".<sup>527</sup> Garrett Stewart also suggests special effects in science-fiction films are employed by the film industry as a way of combating competing new technologies, just as widescreen technologies were in Epic films.<sup>528</sup> It's also true that science-fiction and disaster movies share many traits with each other, as Susan Sontag's

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>524</sup> When discussing the melodramatic and gothic Westerns of the late Forties, he suggests "the [James] Stewart case is exemplary of the tendency of the genres to inherit each other", Britton, 'Stars and Genre', 203.

<sup>525</sup> Keane, S. (2001) *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (London: Wallflower Press), 15.

<sup>526</sup> Ryan, M. and D. Kellner (1990) *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 62.

<sup>527</sup> Ruppersberg, H. (1990) 'The Alien Messiah' in A. Kuhn (ed.) *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Verso), 37.

<sup>528</sup> Stewart, G. (1999) 'Body Snatching: Science Fiction's Photographic Trace' in A. Kuhn (ed.) *Alien Zone II: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Verso), 226-248.

oft-quoted observation that “Science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster,” makes clear.<sup>529</sup> Nick Roddick’s inclusion of both *Soylent Green* and *The Omega Man* within his catalogue of disaster films, under the subcategory of “A future world in which a disaster on a huge scale has already happened”, also highlights their cross-generic status.<sup>530</sup> These two genres, in which the majority of Heston’s star enactments from 1968 onwards take place, can thus be seen to both inherit features of his previous key genre’s style and themes and to share significant features with each other, and we can therefore be alert to the major continuities in Heston’s star enactments within these genres.

### Heston and the Science-Fiction Film

A close examination of Heston’s star enactments within the science-fiction genre will allow us to trace the ‘distinct but reciprocal interventions of the star in the genre’ more subtly than the previously discussed overviews of entire genres can allow for. The genre features of the three science-fiction films that Heston starred in – *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Shaffner, 1968); *The Omega Man* (Boris Sagal, 1971); and *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973) – can also be more specifically delineated within the context of the distinct subgenre of post-apocalyptic science fiction, in which all these films have been placed.<sup>531</sup> The intervention of Charlton Heston’s star presence in this subgenre can be distinguished in the way these three films are classified together in writings on science-fiction cinema, as they are often considered together as a series or trilogy. Xavier Mendik calls them, “a post-apocalyptic trilogy,” and Mark Sample, “a series of three dystopian science fiction movies.”<sup>532</sup> The presence of the star can thus be seen to lend these films a coherence not offered by any of their other features alone. David L. Pike makes the intervention of Heston’s star enactment into this genre most explicit however, when he refers to “the original wave of pulp armageddonism that Heston made his

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<sup>529</sup> Sontag, S. (1968) ‘The Imagination of Disaster’ in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell), 213.

<sup>530</sup> Roddick, N. (1980) ‘Only the Stars Survive: Disaster Movies in the Seventies’ in D. Brady, L. James and B. Sharratt (eds) *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama: Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 247.

<sup>531</sup> Keane, *Disaster Movies*, 12.

<sup>532</sup> Mendik, X. (ed.) (2002) *Necronomicon Presents: Shocking Cinema of the Seventies* (Hereford: Noir Publishing), 12, and M. Sample (2002) ‘There goes the Neighbourhood: The Seventies, the Middle Class and *The Omega Man*’ in X. Mendik (ed.) *Necronomicon Presents: Shocking Cinema of the Seventies* (Hereford: Noir Publishing), 29.

own".<sup>533</sup> Quite how and why Heston can be said to have made this subgenre his own will be investigated in the following analysis through a focus on those features suggested as significant by the work of Dyer, deCordova and Britton: themes and structure, iconography and style.

One of the most useful focuses for analysis of the visual features of the science-fiction film is offered by Vivian Sobchack in her book on this genre, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*.<sup>534</sup> In it she identifies the key visual signifier of the science-fiction film as "a confrontation between and mixture of those images to which we respond as 'alien' and those we know to be familiar".<sup>535</sup> She goes on to suggest that this sense of 'alienness' is not necessarily a function of the image's inherent strangeness, however, and that ordinary and everyday things can be made strange within the science-fiction film's narrative context. She finds that all of Heston's post-apocalyptic science-fiction films provide examples of this type of visual subversion: "in *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973), a tomato and a wilted stick of celery are as strange and wondrous as any alien plant life designed in the studio".<sup>536</sup> She also describes how Earth's environment, specifically the Arizona desert, is framed in such a way that it appears alien in *Planet of the Apes*.<sup>537</sup> In her discussion of "the transformation and alienation of the city" she refers to "the empty city, the untended houses, the corpse-filled hospital beds" of *The Omega Man*.<sup>538</sup> This analysis of Sobchack's thus reveals one of the specific visual features of the science-fiction films Heston stars in: they do not rely so much on the traditional visual signifiers of science-fiction film (such as alien beings and new technologies) but rather on the transformation and alienation of the familiar.

Philippe Mather develops Sobchack's focus on the visually alien further in his investigation into what he terms 'figures of estrangement' in science-fiction films.<sup>539</sup> He sees estrangement as the genre's

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<sup>533</sup> Pike, D.L. (2008) 'A Boy and His Dog: On Will Smith, Apocalypse and *I Am Legend*', *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 59, Feb 2008 <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/59/59legend.php>, 1.

<sup>534</sup> Sobchack, V. (1993) (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New York: Ungar).

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>536</sup> Sobchack, *Screening Space*, 87.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>539</sup> Mather, P. (2002) 'Figures of Estrangement in Science Fiction Film', *Science Fiction Studies*, 29, 2, July, 186-201.

distinctive trait and sees it as “a rhetorical effect created by the use of specific stylistic devices that I call figures of estrangement”.<sup>540</sup> He also distinguishes between ‘speculative’ images which are the most alien, and ‘extrapolative’ which are the least, suggesting, like Sobchack, that these extrapolative images “are not intrinsically alien, but are made strange through the narrative context”.<sup>541</sup> This distinction allows us to consider how the star figure of Charlton Heston can be seen to act as just such a figure of estrangement in his appearances in this genre. Heston’s fame and familiarity can help to make more believable and therefore engaging, the fantastic elements of a science-fiction film narrative, as Erwin Kim’s comment that “if it can happen to Charlton Heston it can happen to anyone,” makes clear.<sup>542</sup> His figure is, indeed, not intrinsically strange or alien but its generic context can make it so for an audience familiar with his appearance in the context of Historical Epics. The sight of Heston interacting with modern technology can be visually unsettling as when, for example, we see him driving cars and motorbikes in *The Omega Man*, captaining a spaceship in *Planet of the Apes* and jumping on and off trucks in a high-tech factory in *Soylent Green*.<sup>543</sup> Equally Heston, in a contemporary-looking world and costume, can work to make his figure appear strange to the audience and thus prepare it for other things not being quite right.

### ***If It Can Happen to Charlton Heston, It Can Happen to Anyone: Charlton Heston as a Figure of Estrangement***

In the opening sequence of *Planet of the Apes* Heston’s star figure appears in the unfamiliar context of a typical science-fiction setting. The mise-en-scène consists of clean lines and shiny metal and he is engaged in the genre’s typical actions: reading dials and making a recorded report into a microphone. Charlton Heston captaining a spaceship exemplifies Mather’s description of “a familiar image made alien through appearing in an unfamiliar context”.<sup>544</sup> It is also a highly speculative context: the dials

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<sup>540</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

<sup>542</sup> Kim, E. (1985) *Franklin J. Shaffner* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press) 239. Quoted in E. Greene (1998) ‘*Planet of the Apes*’ as American Myth: Race, Politics and Popular Culture (Middletown Connecticut : Wesleyan University Press), 41.

<sup>543</sup> The out-of-character nature of these actions is supported by Heston’s admission in his autobiography that this was the first time he had ridden a motorbike in his life. C. Heston (1995) *In the Arena: The Autobiography* (London: Harper Collins), 443.

<sup>544</sup> Mather, ‘Figures of Estrangement’, 188.

he's reading, for example, display how many centuries into the future the ship has travelled. There are later scenes in the film, however, where Heston/Taylor's interaction with more everyday items creates a different form of visual estrangement. At one point for example, Heston/Taylor makes a paper aeroplane which he then 'flies' across the room. The apes' horrified reaction to this innocent everyday item, because of the challenges it poses to the orthodox views of science they must adhere to, achieves this estrangement effect very powerfully. Much later in the film, when Heston/Taylor and the chimps have travelled to an archaeological dig in 'The Forbidden Zone,' we watch him pick up and identify various modern human artefacts - false teeth, eyeglasses, a pacemaker - which are made strange by their reception in the film as items of ancient historical evidence. The character of Taylor himself can also be seen as such a figure, as the film manages to make the everyday occurrence of a speaking human appear like a monstrous aberration. The powerful effect of the film's most famous line, when the recaptured Heston/Taylor growls "Take your stinking paws off me, you damn dirty ape," can be seen as partly due to the audience having been successfully drawn into the film's logic, whereby a speaking human becomes a strange and shocking phenomenon.

The estrangement of Heston's figure in *The Omega Man* is achieved through a different kind of visual subversion. This film opens in a familiar setting with recognisable props in its close shots of Heston/Neville driving around the streets of Los Angeles in a red convertible. He appears relaxed as he is smiling as the wind runs through his hair and he even puts some easy-listening music on the car's eight-track, which begins to play diegetically. The film then cuts to an extreme long shot, however, which reveals the eerie emptiness and silence of the rest of the city. Within this extremely long shot Heston/Neville's car makes the only movement and the only sound, both of which are now dwarfed to insignificance by the post-apocalyptic cityscape of a deserted downtown L.A.

This shock edit introduces us to the most common form of estrangement in *The Omega Man*, one which is achieved by watching Heston/Neville carrying out everyday activities in a radically altered, but still recognisable world. This alienation effect is increased by the film featuring many identifiable L.A. landmarks in its extensive location shooting.<sup>545</sup> In a dark parody of the consumer experience, Heston/Neville is shown using the deserted city for its previously typical functions. He goes shopping,

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<sup>545</sup> These include two famous old movie theatres, *The Olympic* and *The Tower*, and the area known as Bunker Hill (the use of these landmarks in the films is described in the documentary film *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (Thom Andersen, 2003)).

he visits a bar for a drink and (in a justly famous sequence) he stops at a cinema to watch the film *Woodstock* (Michael Wadleigh, 1970), yet he is the only living person present during these normally social activities. This unfamiliar and alienating aspect is emphasised further by Heston/Neville's habit of engaging in one-sided conversations with both himself and non-existent shop assistants. The strangeness of his 'everyday' activities is also emphasised visually when we watch him sitting alone in the cinema and the film cuts between the crowded and lively scenes he's watching on the screen and long shots of the figure of Heston/Neville alone among rows of empty cinema seats.

Many critics have commented on the defamiliarising effect of the common visual trope of the deserted and/or destroyed city in science-fiction cinema, which is typical of the three films of Heston's under discussion. *Soylent Green* takes place in an overcrowded and smog-filled New York, which also turns out to be the location of *Planet of the Apes*; and *The Omega Man*, as we have seen, is set in an abandoned and decaying Los Angeles. Vivian Sobchack suggests that these settings can be linked to these films' historical context as well as their generic preoccupations:

In the late 1960s to the mid 1970s, the science-fiction city has no positive values to sustain it – and so it falls down and apart. Indeed, many of the period's films – from *Planet of the Apes* (1968) to *Logan's Run* (1978) – imagine cities such as New York and Washington DC in a fantasy of 'the body in pieces', monuments and buildings now fragments strewn on an abandoned landscape on a radically altered planet.<sup>546</sup>

Heston's star figure can be seen to be being utilised in a similar way to these cityscapes in the films' visual and thematic schemas, as he appears both recognisable but also radically changed and unfamiliar. In *The Omega Man*, for example, we see Heston dressed unfamiliarly in contemporary clothes, which in one scene are extremely flamboyant and fashionable. This costume of elaborately ruffled shirt and green velvet jacket could be seen to echo his previous appearances in historical costumes; its context within early Seventies male fashion and the rest of Neville's bachelor-pad styled penthouse apartment, however, makes reading it as reflecting contemporary trends far more likely. His penthouse apartment, for example, is also extremely fashionably decorated with dark carved-wood

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<sup>546</sup>Sobchack, V. (1999) 'Cities on the Edge of Time: The Urban Science Fiction Film' in Kuhn, A. (ed.) *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Verso), 134.



furniture, a well-stocked bar, chess set and stereo record player. Charlton Heston as a 1970s playboy, therefore, is the radically changed and unfamiliar role that the film assigns him here.

*Soylent Green* is a film in which an estrangement effect is created that has already been commented on in some detail by Vivian Sobchack. This film, she suggests, “is at its best when visually convincing us that the staples of life we take for granted today are completely unknown to all but the most influential and wealthy”.<sup>547</sup> The most sustained depiction of this situation is created when Heston/Thorn has taken items from the apartment of the victim whose murder he is investigating. His partner and friend Sol Roth (Edward G. Robinson), who remembers the world before its present state of ecological disaster, is shown regarding the everyday items with both wonder and dismay. Sol later cooks this food and serves Heston/Thorn his first meal of real rather than synthetic food. The shots of Heston/Thorn eating, with close-ups on his reactions of extreme pleasure, are of a type with other moments in this film where his exaggerated actions and expressions reveal the poverty of the future world he inhabits.

For example, the dialogue in the film explicitly refers to ‘The Greenhouse Effect’ which is shown to be affecting the city through the use of a yellowy/green haze in exterior shots. This atmosphere of constantly high temperatures is also portrayed through the actors/characters being constantly shiny with sweat and we see Heston/Neville repeatedly remove his neckerchief to wipe his neck and face in a gesture that reminds us of the oppressive heat. Whenever he enters the luxurious apartment of Simonson, therefore, we see him head straight to the air-conditioning unit and let the cold air blow on his body and face with an expression of relief, assuming exaggerated postures as he does so. Running water is treated with the same sense of awe by Heston/Thorn when we see him wash his hands and face in the apartment, for example, feeling the running water over his hands for an extended shot. The rarity and appeal of these everyday activities is most effectively suggested in the way the film’s love-interest character, Shirl, persuades him to stay with her one night because she is scared.

Heston/Neville doesn’t stay because he loves and cares for her, or even for sex, as he seems to be able to take that from her as and when he chooses: he is seduced by her offers of anything he wants to eat, the air conditioning turned up full and the chance of a shower. The estrangement effect achieved in this film, therefore, can be seen to be very closely linked to the enactment of the star, through

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<sup>547</sup> Sobchack, *Screening Space*, 131.

Heston/Neville's exaggerated enactments of relish when given the opportunity to indulge in mundane everyday activities.

As well as appearing unfamiliar, Heston's characters, like the cities they inhabit, can also be seen to be 'falling apart' in these films. The pressure of living in the nightmare scenarios his characters find themselves in is portrayed as taking its toll on his sanity in a variety of ways. In *Planet of the Apes* there are two scenes in particular where Heston's enactment portrays a character on the verge of madness. The first is when the ape guard, who is enraged by Heston/Taylor's speaking, torments him with a water hose by firing it at him maliciously whenever he tries to speak. Heston/Taylor is shown desperately trying to protect himself from the blast with his hands and arms in increasingly distorted positions. He finally loses all control and, with his eyes closed and his face distorted by despair, he opens his mouth wide in a scream as he cries out hysterically, "It's a madhouse... a madhouse!" elongating the words as he declaims them. There is a similar enactment of breakdown at the end of this film when Heston/Taylor discovers the shocking truth that rather than being on a far-distant planet he is actually on a future earth destroyed by nuclear Armageddon. At this dramatic revelation we see him first fall to his knees and then collapse forward onto his hands as he pounds the ground with his fist. In this crouching position he drops his head in despair and then finally raises it as he curses all humanity, his delivery dramatically extending the words: "Damn you!... God damn you all to hell!"

In *The Omega Man* Neville's tenuous hold on his sanity is revealed when he thinks he hears a telephone ringing as he leaves the cinema. His mouth opens in dismay and he looks left and right with a confused expression as the diegetic sound appears to be coming from more than one direction. He stumbles indecisively with his arms hanging loosely by his side, breaks into a stumbling run towards a payphone, but then stops himself awkwardly in midstride with his body bent partly forward. In a close-up we see him take in a breath before he turns his head away from the payphone shouting, "There is no phone ringing, damn it!" In *Soylent Green* this breakdown only occurs at the end of the film but it is an equally dramatic and devastating moment when Thorn discovers the horrific truth about Soylent Green from Sol Roth. Heston/Thorn's final cry in this film, "Soylent Green is people", shares many traits with the moments discussed from the other two films as it is given in a desperate, hoarse delivery and accompanied by a melodramatic gesture, in this case an upwardly thrust arm.

## The Embodiment of the Last Man: The Dehumanisation of Humans

The visual estrangement effects we have considered so far spring from the interaction between characters and other visual aspects of mise-en-scène, but Sobchack points out that the type of 'visual subversion' she has identified as typical of this genre can extend from everyday objects to human figures.<sup>548</sup> She discusses this key feature of the science-fiction genre under the subheading 'The Dehumanisation of Humans,' using examples from films in which this dehumanisation is mostly the effect of aliens taking over otherwise visually normal humans.<sup>549</sup> Although the dehumanisation of humans is also a key feature of the science-fiction films Heston appears in, it is presented in all of them as the result of man-made disasters such as nuclear and biological warfare, or pollution and over-population, rather than one created by outside alien forces. In the post-apocalyptic scenarios that Heston's characters find themselves in, he is posited by the films' narratives as the 'last man.' This status can be seen to be the result of his unique embodiment and maintenance of certain human values. Heston's role as the last man is also established through the visual contrast between his figure and the 'other' kinds of dehumanised humans that are depicted, and the display of his body plays a key role in establishing this contrast.

In *Planet of the Apes*, for example, this distinction between Heston as a true human and the non-human 'others' who inhabit the planet is established by the audiovisual contrast between Heston/Taylor and these human/animal hybrids. The audiovisual features of this contrast are familiar ones for the star figure of Charlton Heston, as not only are these human 'others' mute, the audible sign of their animal nature, they are also short and dark. In his previous enactments in different genres Heston's superior status is often depicted through his being the tallest and fairest among groups of figures in the frame. The human animals are also undifferentiated from one another and we experience them framed as groups rather than individuals. Indeed the female Nova, the one human animal who is differentiated in the narrative, only gains individualisation through her interaction with Heston/Taylor. It is he who names her and whilst thus assigning her individuality he also at the same time assumes a godlike superiority over her. In order to firmly establish Heston /Taylor as the last real human the film's

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<sup>548</sup> Sobchack, *Screening Space*, 120.

<sup>549</sup> "The 'taken over' human figures of the low-budget SF film make up in their power to disturb us what they lack in the power to astonish", Sobchack, *ibid.*

narrative doesn't allow the other 'real' human characters to remain in the plot for long, and the ways they are disposed of also dehumanise them and their bodies in various visually dramatic ways.

Stewart, the female astronaut dies en route to the planet and her corpse resembles that of a desiccated old lady after a leak in her time-travel compartment leaves her exposed to real time. Dodge, the only black astronaut, doesn't only die but is stuffed and displayed as an exhibit in the apes' museum, and Langdon is reduced even lower than an animal, to the status of 'vegetable', after being captured and lobotomised. Interestingly Heston/Taylor himself is repeatedly threatened by the apes with dehumanising procedures such as castration and experimental brain surgery. This repeated threat of castration, and his violent reaction against it, should remind us that his status in the film depends on his being not only the last human, but specifically, the last *man*.

Heston's figure is not that of just any man, however, as Pauline Kael's description of his appearance in this film reminds us: "physically, Heston, with his perfect, lean-hipped, powerful body, is a god-like hero; built for strength," and this is emphasised by extended scenes in which Heston/Taylor's naked body is almost completely exposed.<sup>550</sup> The use of Heston's body can thus be seen as an example of what Britton described as the distinct but reciprocal intervention of the star in the genre. As might be expected of Heston's star enactments, all three of these films contain scenes that display his nude body, especially his chest, but the significance of that display is altered by its occurring within the generic context of science fiction. At first sight the motivations for, and images of, Heston/Taylor's exposed body in *Planet of the Apes* bear most similarity to those in the Epic films. This is because Heston/Taylor's nudity is explained by both captivity and mistreatment. He first appears naked, however, after voluntarily removing his clothes along with his fellow astronauts in a scene that proves significant for tracing the meanings of Heston/Taylor's body in this film. We see the astronauts cast off their clothes (and technology-filled backpacks) when they come across a beautiful waterfall-filled pool after their long trek across the desert. Their innocent nudity as they swim in the lushly fringed pool is here visually suggestive of man's state in paradise before the Fall. Given the film's highly pessimistic ending it may seem unlikely to read a post-nuclear holocaust Earth as Eden, but the idea of Heston/Taylor as a second Adam is equally hard to escape at the end of the film. This reading is also supported by his explanation to Nova of the astronauts' original mission, in which Stewart was to be

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<sup>550</sup> Kael, P. (1970) *Going Steady* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company) 37.

“the new Eve”. Through this first display of his naked body then, Heston/Taylor is positioned as simultaneously the *first* as well as the *last* man.

Once in captivity, however, Heston/Taylor’s nudity carries no such innocent connotations. This is emphasised when we see Heston/Taylor attempting to cover his exposed body more completely than the human animals, demonstrating his true human nature in contrast to their animal ignorance.<sup>551</sup> His evident ‘human’ sense of shame leads the chimpanzee scientist, Zira, to comment, “it’s most unusual, he’s using that old blanket as clothing.” Heston/Taylor’s reaction to this enforced exposure alerts us to the generically inflected use of Heston’s nudity in this film; it is both what makes him appear like an animal and yet his reaction to it reveals him to be a true human being. Science fiction has always been associated with an interest in questions about the nature of humanity, although this has most often been played out through plots involving more extrapolative forms of life such as robots or aliens.<sup>552</sup> This film is equally engaged in such a debate, nevertheless, through the struggle over the body and nature of Heston/Taylor. This demonstrates J.P. Telotte’s understanding that “with this concerted focus on the human body . . . these films reflect a central concern of the genre . . . an anxiety about our very nature”.<sup>553</sup> In *Planet of the Apes* this anxiety is played out through a speculative scenario in which a reversed evolutionary process has produced sentient apes who control human animals. Heston’s physical appearance and stature is invoked by the film to visually highlight the paradox of this situation, as Eric Greene has pointed out:

The casting produced a visual element that reinforced certain of the film’s narrative and thematic elements: because of Heston’s height, Taylor towers above everyone else in the film. Even half-naked, wounded, mute, and caged as an animal, Taylor’s stature, perhaps inside as well as outside we may ponder, overpowers that of his captors.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> The film’s production team were well aware that logically and symbolically the ‘other’ humans should have been naked, but that wasn’t permissible under the production code. According to Eric Greene’s DVD commentary, the first draft of the script called for the female human animals to be bare breasted but the MPAA told 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox that such a move would not be approved.

<sup>552</sup> “This genre has focused its attention on the problematic nature of human being and the difficult task of being human”, J.P. Telotte (1995) *Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 2.

<sup>553</sup> Telotte, *Replications*, 4; although the films he is explicitly referring to here are ones with cyborg characters.

<sup>554</sup> Greene, *Planet of the Apes as American Myth*, 40.

Greene suggests that the film's mise-en-scène contributes to this effect as Heston/Taylor's "cage is on a platform that makes him even taller and results in the visual irony that while Dr. Zaius expounds on the inferiority of 'man' he is forced to look up at the object of his derision".<sup>555</sup> Closer inspection of Heston/Taylor's posture, expression and movement in his captive scenes and the way they are filmed however, reveals a more complex use of his figure. In the earliest scenes for example, when he is first caged and cannot speak, he hunches his body and lowers his head in the presence of his ape captors. He also holds his hands up near his face in a begging gesture and uses a beseeching expression when looking at Zira and Dr. Zaius. These close-ups, moreover, are rendered through a neutral straight-on camera angle. We don't see Heston/Taylor filmed from a low angle and looking powerful until he manages to write his name and Dr. Zira calls him Taylor for the first time. As she acknowledges his human identity we cut to her point of view looking up at him, which then places him in a more dominant position in relation to her. It's important to emphasise, however, that this only happens once his 'superior' status as a true human being has been established in the narrative.

Similarly in the trial scene, Heston/Taylor's 'overpowering' stature is visually countered by a variety of strategies and these demonstrate effectively how Heston's height and build do not always simply denote his power. Costume and props, for example, are used to undermine his impressive physical presence. He is led into the courtroom on a leash which is secured around his neck, for example, and one of the judges humiliates him further by ordering the complete removal of his rags. Although Heston/Taylor actually grabs the rags and manages to cover his front with them, he is otherwise completely unclothed for the rest of this scene. Also in this scene he twice assumes a kneeling position which has the effect of bringing him lower than the ape characters in the frame. He does this voluntarily at first, in order to talk to Zira and Cornelius, but in later shots (when he is also bound in a net and gagged) he is forced to his knees by the guards and he remains in that position for the rest of the trial. Given the significance of his bodily display it is interesting that Heston/Taylor continues to be very scantily clad even after his escape from captivity. His liberator, Dr. Zira, replaces his dirty rags with an even more revealing loincloth despite his demand for clothes. When they are free of the city, however, his costume changes as he cuts off his leash collar and arms himself with a rifle strapped across his shoulder. Once he is free and armed, the display of his naked body can be seen to highlight his power,

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<sup>555</sup> Ibid.

strength and domination but, as we have seen, his body does not convey this alone without the support of other aspects of film form, such as framing, camera position and mise-en-scène.

It has been noted that Heston's seminudity in *Planet of the Apes* is mostly justified by his capture and degrading captivity and that these are very similar reasons to those provided for the exposure of his body in his Epic film appearances; but in *The Omega Man* and *Soylent Green* the motivating factors offered for the display of his nude body seem rather more perfunctory and conventional. *The Omega Man*, for example, motivates the exposure of Heston's torso through scenarios in which he needs to cool down or undergo medical treatment and in *Soylent Green* his body is only exposed in sexual scenarios. It is also the case in both these films that Heston's character takes his own clothes off to reveal his body, which has not usually been the case in previous films. Indeed the number of times Heston/Neville takes his top off in *The Omega Man* may strike one as excessive precisely because it is not excused with the more familiar Hestonian scenarios. A detailed investigation into the exposure of Heston's body in these films reveals how their generic concerns are played out across and through the body of the star, circulating both old and new meanings for it and how it, nevertheless, can still be seen to emphasise Heston's role in these films as the last true human.

### **Heston's Classical Body and *The Omega Man***

The first time we see Heston/Neville reveal his body in *The Omega Man* is when he returns to his heavily fortified apartment after fighting off the attacks of this film's human 'others' who are referred to as The Family. We see Heston/Neville casually removing his jacket and shirt as he moves around his apartment, discarding them on the furniture as he goes. The film establishes his motivation for this action by having Heston/Neville appear shiny with sweat before he removes his clothes and also wiping his face with his shirt before discarding it. We then see him prowling around his apartment bare-chested for some time. This suggests that he feels comfortable and relaxed in his own home, which is a significant detail in the narrative, as he has attempted to make his apartment a haven of civilisation and he refuses to be driven out of it by The Family. We see him pour himself a drink and then he switches on his elaborate CCTV monitoring screens. This results in the surreal sight of a magnified bare-chested Heston/Neville looking back at himself from the monitor. He is interrupted in his domestic routine, however, by the whoops and howls of The Family in the streets below as they engage in their nightly destruction of any remaining traces of culture or technology. As he watches them from his

balcony, we see his seminude figure framed by the open shutters on which he rests his arms, looking down on them with contempt. The difference in height between Heston's figure and that of the non-humans that Eric Greene commented on in *Planet of the Apes* is also thus established in this film's mise-en-scène.

This particular shot could also be seen to justify Sample's contention that in its self-containment Heston/Neville's body is posited as a classical body:

Much of the visual force of *The Omega Man* derives from this opposition between the classical and the grotesque body. There is Robert Neville, portrayed with the trademark Hestonian bearing, self-assured and self-righteous, a singular heroic figure, standing tall and mighty. Then there is the Other, those cadaverous humans ravaged by the plague.<sup>556</sup>

The classical connotations of Heston/Neville's body are further emphasised by the mise-en-scène of his apartment, not least the bust of Caesar Augustus against whom he plays chess, and the contrasting gothic trappings of his opponents. These classical connotations suggest that, however its exposure may be motivated, once Heston's body is exposed in this film it continues to signify the same meanings that have been established by Heston's appearances in Epic films. This continuity within Heston's enactments is borne out by an examination of the other kind of scenario in which Heston removes his shirt in *The Omega Man*, which is when he is giving his own blood in order to create a vaccine for the plague that has ravaged the world. Despite the difference in setting, this is a very similar scenario to scenes in his Epic enactments in which Heston's chest is exposed because he has been injured and needs to receive treatment. It also carries a similar significance in that it symbolises the character's willingness to suffer for the sake of his ideals.<sup>557</sup>

The other extended sequence in this film in which Heston's torso is exposed, however, highlights important differences between the significance of Heston's body in the Epic and in the science-fiction film. This sequence begins with shots of Heston/Neville dressed in a tracksuit and running through the deserted city. He is on his mission to find the 'nest' of The Family so he can destroy them permanently. When he then enters a sports shop we see his skin is shiny with sweat and his tracksuit jacket

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<sup>556</sup> Sample, 'There Goes the Neighbourhood', 31.

<sup>557</sup> In both *El Cid* and *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, for example, Heston's chest isn't exposed until he is dangerously injured by an arrow and a fall respectively.



unzipped. As he takes off his jacket, and repeats his earlier gesture of wiping his face with it before discarding it, heat and sweat are once again established as the reasons for his nudity. As he 'shops' for a new jacket, however, the film begins to create a tenser atmosphere than these ironic scenes of Heston/Neville 'shopping' have previously conveyed. The presence of shop mannequins, human in form but not alive, create the eerie sense that Heston/Neville is not really alone and Heston/Neville's nudity at this point, therefore, can be seen to represent his vulnerability rather than strength. In this suspenseful atmosphere Heston/Neville enters the ladies department and at one point he turns suddenly and finds himself entangled with one of the female mannequins, her arms lying across his naked chest in a gesture of embrace. From this point his nudity also begins to take on sexual connotations, which are emphasised as shot-reverse-shot editing establishes his voyeuristic gaze at the female mannequins. As he gazes at a bikini-clad mannequin and slowly raises his hand to touch her on the waist we see Heston/Neville's face bearing an uneasy expression.<sup>558</sup> It is a rather uncomfortable moment for both the character and the audience, raising awkward questions as it does about just how Neville deals with sexual desire as the last man on earth (Taylor in *Planet of the Apes*, after all, was given a female explicitly to mate with). The film pre-empts these questions however by revealing that one of the mannequins is actually a real human female (and not one of The Family) who Heston/Neville then proceeds to chase, on foot and still bare-chested, out of the store and through a park. It's quite unusual for Heston's nudity to be linked so explicitly to his character's sexuality and this may be seen as an intervention of the genre, with its focus on and interest in questions of human nature, into the star's enactment.

As in *Planet of the Apes*, Heston's body is also used in *The Omega Man* to visually signify his position as the last human in contrast to the non-human entities that would destroy him. As even the film's tagline admits, however, Heston/Neville's status as the last man on earth in this film needs some justification.<sup>559</sup> Heston/Neville can only be considered the last human on earth, by both the film and himself, through the designation of all the other survivors as non-human in some way. This is possible because all those still alive, apart from Heston, are infected by the man-made virus that was unleashed

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<sup>558</sup> Earlier in the film we saw him tear down a calendar, enraged not only by its date that reminded him of the disaster that left him alone, but also by its pin-up image reminding him of his enforced celibacy.

<sup>559</sup> "The last man alive... is not alone!" This tagline from the film's poster is also reproduced on the cover of the recent UK DVD release of the film.

before the film's action starts. The Family, who try to destroy Neville every night, is made up of so-called tertiary cases. They are at the stage of the disease when the infected become both physically and mentally 'othered'. Not only do they look monstrous, with albinism and skin lesions, they are also mentally affected, as Heston/Neville explains: "They're homicidal lunatics for God's sake!" This psychological change is what renders them less than human and justifies his campaign of extermination against them. The way they are represented visually in the film is also seen to justify his merciless attitude towards them. The figure they resemble most strongly is that of the horror film zombie and their resemblance to figures of gothic horror is emphasised by the fact that they can only come out at night and are dressed in black robes.<sup>560</sup> But even the seemingly healthy characters Heston/Neville encounters later in the film are represented as no longer fully human as they are all also infected and the film makes it clear that it is only a matter of time before they also succumb to the infection and become like the 'others', as we see two of them do. Heston/Neville's unique status as the only uninfected human on earth is made clear in the film's dialogue:

Neville: I don't have it, the plague, I'm immune.

Motorcycle boy: Everybody has it.

Neville: Everybody but me.

The displays of Heston's body in this film then can be seen to visually emphasise his unique strength, health and vitality, in opposition to the physically and mentally dehumanised figures that every other human figure in the film either is or will become.

An insight into the use of Heston's body in this film is also available through the practice of remake commutation, as *The Omega Man* was remade as *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007) starring Will Smith. The key difference between the two star enactments that David L. Pike noted when he compared their two enactments was, indeed, the extent of bodily display:

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<sup>560</sup> Although in the story from which the film was adapted they are more like vampires.

While Heston's chest was integral to his macho persona the only buff scene we get here is a textbook workout sequence [in which] Smith's muscles put the pre-personal trainer physique of Heston . . . to shame.<sup>561</sup>

These comments alert us to some of the specificities in the presentation of Heston's body in this film and what they reveal about the interaction between star and genre. Despite the display of Heston's chest being an integral part of his persona, its frequent appearance in *The Omega Man* shouldn't be seen solely as an example of the star aesthetic overriding the genre's themes, as Pike seems to suggest. This display of the hero's body, as has been demonstrated, is also integral to *The Omega Man*'s generic concern with definitions of humanness. In the Will Smith version of the film the figures of the plague victims are computer-generated effects and their monstrousness is far more exaggerated. They bear so little relation to 'normal' human figures, in fact, that there is no need for an explicit bodily display to establish the hero's fully human figure in contrast, which explains the relatively rare exposure of Smith's body in this film. Interestingly, these generic concerns with the question of human nature not only explain why much of Heston/Neville's nudity takes place under different narrative conditions to those previously found motivating Heston's nudity in the Epic films, but also why his body isn't exposed in some of those situations where it usually would be. Heston/Neville is captured and bound on three separate occasions, for example, but on none of those occasions is his chest exposed, as it surely would have been in an Epic film. These differences can be seen to reflect the different generic priorities of the science-fiction film, as much as the intervention of the star within them.

### **The Anti-Heroic Body - Soylent Green**

There is far less exposure of Heston's body in his final science-fiction film appearance, which one may be tempted to explain through reference to such extra-filmic reasons as the fact that by 1973 Heston was fifty years old and no longer in his physical prime. Such an idea is undermined, however, by the fact that he does display his bare torso in *Earthquake* which was released a year later in 1974. The lack of bodily display in *Soylent Green* can be better explained as a generically driven feature therefore, as the film's narrative follows a police investigation story and Heston's nudity only takes

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<sup>561</sup> Pike, D.L. (2008) "A Boy and His Dog: On Will Smith, Apocalypse and *I Am Legend*" in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 59, 2. <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/59/59legend.php>, 2.

place within the generic parameters of that kind of plot. The investigator who falls for the beautiful girl who may or may not be involved in the crime, for example, is a staple narrative element of this genre and it is within this generic scenario that Heston's nudity occurs in this film. Heston/Thorn takes off his shirt on only two occasions, and both of them occur when he is with the love interest character, Shirl (once when they go to bed, and once when they take a shower together) but on both occasions any Hestonian nudity is brief and obscured by editing or framing. The first of these scenes also offers an interesting contrast to the sexualisation of Heston's body in *The Omega Man*, as the acts of undressing and bodily display within *Soylent Green* are deliberately desexualised by the narrative.

This apparent paradox can be explained by reference to the film's dystopic presentation of relationships between the sexes generally. Shirl, for example, is referred to as 'furniture', as she is a female companion who comes with the apartment, and Heston/Thorn takes her as a perk of his job, very much like he takes the other luxuries he finds in there. The coldness of their sexual encounter is emphasised by the fact that they are seen undressing quite matter-of-factly and Heston/Thorn continues with her interrogation throughout. His nudity in this scene can thus be seen to be desexualised, despite taking place within an overtly sexual situation. This effect is also created through the way the scene is filmed: Heston/Thorn's back is to the camera while he undresses, for example, and when he does turn to face the camera Shirl's body obscures his. Similarly, although their bodies are naked in the scene where they take a shower together, the shot is filmed through the obscured glass of the cubicle, meaning there's very little explicit display.

Heston's character does not begin this film with any sense of himself as a special human, in contrast to his roles in the other two films, and he also fails to display the strong moral judgements of those characters. The audience is shown that Heston/Thorn is as morally compromised as everyone else in the film's deeply corrupt society; we see him steal from the scene of crime, for example, and pay off other equally corrupt officers. His stature and presence *are* made use of symbolically in this film, however, as they can be seen to lend nobility to his actions even at times when their moral motivation is presented ambiguously. When he stands up to his police chief, for example, in refusing to close the murder investigation, the reasons he has for doing so are left unclear by the script. Heston's presence and stature, however, incline the audience to read his decision as a moral one as he is framed towering over his 'superior' refusing to be coerced. He also uses his status to protect Shirl and her

girlfriends from physical abuse at the hands of their employer in similarly ambiguous circumstances. His own moral standing hardly bears examination in this scene as he has entered the apartment uninvited and taken Shirl to bed as a perk of the job. His towering over the violent manager who has assaulted two of the girls and the protective impulse this reveals, however, lend him a moral superiority in the scene. Despite these moments, however, Heston/Thorn is not presented as unequivocally heroically in this film as Heston's characters were in the previous two films, which may partly explain the film's lack of recourse to the significance of his exposed body.

The less frequent exposure of Heston's body in this film may also be due to his more ambiguous positioning as *The Last Man* in its narrative. In the previous films Heston's position as the last man was emphasised by his isolated existence for large stretches of the narrative; Thorn however shares his job, and his shabby apartment, with his investigating partner Sol Roth (Edward G. Robinson). It is through his relationship with Sol that we see Heston/Thorn learn to become a better man rather than through his being depicted as a heroic character from the beginning. And although after Sol's state-assisted suicide Heston/Thorn can be seen to become the last man, initially this role is taken by Sol himself, who is "the film's moral centre" according to David Desser.<sup>562</sup> Sol is positioned as the last fully human character through his frequent references to his memories of the world before its environmental destruction and also through his attempts to maintain civilised human values such as reading and writing. One aspect of Sol's characterisation that contributes in particular to his status as the last human is his Jewishness, which the film emphasises both through the casting of Edward G. Robinson but also through his frequent use of Yiddish expressions. According to David Desser, the Jewishness of Sol carries specific connotations that contribute to his positioning as the last man in this film: "the Jew is living testimony to the destructive power of totalitarianism, the authentic man, the truly human, for having survived the greatest attempt at dehumanisation".<sup>563</sup>

We see Sol share his vital human knowledge with Thorn in various ways, including telling him, "there used to be a world, you schmuck." Despite their bantering style of dialogue, theirs is also the only warm human relationship we see in the whole film. Sol also cooks the real food Heston/Thorn brings

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<sup>562</sup> Desser, D. (1999) 'Race, Space and Class: The Politics of Cityscapes in Science-Fiction Films' in Kuhn, A. (ed.) *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science-Fiction Cinema* (London: Verso), 90.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid., 90.

home and shows him how to eat it with human dignity, by using cutlery. Sol teaches Thorn his most important lesson about being truly human, however, when he decides to end his life in the state-sponsored euthanasia clinic. This facility allows the dying to select the music and images they want to experience in their last moments and although Heston/Thorn arrives too late to prevent Sol's death, he is in time to watch the widescreen images of natural beauty that Sol has chosen to accompany his passing. These images, whilst acting as a nostalgic reminder of the past for Sol, prove a shocking revelation of what has been lost for Heston/Thorn. The smiling Sol says to his friend, "I told you Thorn," and Heston/Thorn replies, with tears in his eyes and a catch in his throat, "How could I know? How could I...how could I ever imagine?" Thus Thorn can be seen to inherit from Sol his understanding and appreciation of what it means to be a real human in the real world. This is not the only vital knowledge that Sol passes on to Thorn in this scene, however. Sol also reveals to Heston/Thorn the awful truth about the provenance of Soy lent Green, knowledge so horrible that it has driven Sol to this suicidal death and an earlier character to insanity. Now Heston/Thorn has to prove himself the last true human by being able to both bear the burden and witness to the truth.

The forces of dehumanisation we find in the science-fiction film can thus be seen to take a different form in *Soylent Green* from the previous two films. The mass of humanity are portrayed as having lost all individualism in this film due to overpopulation and ecological degradation, rather than through any biological or evolutionary change. The majority of human figures in the film are visibly reduced to indistinguishable crowds, queues, heaps and mobs and, in the final dehumanisation, to food. Heston/Thorn, however, has resisted this dehumanisation, which is emphasised when we see him climbing over heaps of humanity or struggling through crowds of them as he undertakes his investigation. The stairs to his apartment, for example, are packed with sleeping bodies which we watch him make his way over and around whenever he leaves or returns. This dehumanisation of the individual within the crowd reaches its fullest visual embodiment in the scenes of riot at the food market. As the limited supply of food runs out, the market crowd turn nasty and are ordered to leave; when they do not, 'scoop' trucks come in and literally scoop up groups of people and dump them in the back like so much rubbish. This dehumanisation of the human figure through interaction with machinery is further demonstrated through the treatment of dead bodies in the film. Twice we see how dead bodies are collected for disposal in garbage trucks: the shrouded bodies are taken up at the back where rubbish would go and they are then sent to 'waste disposal' centres. That Heston/Thorn is

fighting against this dehumanisation is made explicit when he says in his final speech to Hatcher, “Next thing they’ll be breeding us like cattle for food.” His willingness to expose the truth, and die proclaiming it, contrasts him to the dehumanised masses and allows him to finally achieve heroic status.

### **The Performance of Being Human: Performance Style in the Science-Fiction Film**

Both the defamiliarisation and the display of Heston’s figure in these films can be seen to demonstrate reciprocal interventions of the star in the genre and, as we have seen, the significances Heston’s star figure has accrued through previous enactments are both restated and developed in these films. His classical body, for example, whilst retaining its connotations of self-containment and strength is also called upon in this genre to stand for all humanity and its values. One further aspect of style and iconography that hasn’t yet been commented on, however, is performance style which, as was suggested earlier in this chapter, should allow for very specific conclusions to be drawn about the interplay of genre and star conventions across these films. Christine Cornea has highlighted how little attention has been paid to performance style in the science-fiction film when she suggests “performances given by actors working within the genre are not taken seriously and receive little critical attention”.<sup>564</sup> Inspired by Richard deCordova’s call for more investigations into the relationship between performance style and genre, however, she devotes a chapter to investigating the generic features of performance in science-fiction films and how they interact with the genre’s themes. What she identifies is ‘highly stylised’ acting that “frequently operates to defamiliarise aspects of supposedly ‘naturalistic’ acting, thereby making questions of human performance or the performance of being human integral to the genre”.<sup>565</sup> She further defines the features of what she described as ‘highly stylised acting’ as an underplayed or blank style, and identifies how it is commonly used to portray the non-human ‘other’ which is such a key feature of the science-fiction film.<sup>566</sup>

Both the performance-style features of *blankness* and *underplaying* can be applied to the performances of the non-humans in Heston’s science-fiction films, as well as to the alien-possessed characters and cyborgs to which she is referring. The human animals in *Planet of the Apes*, for

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<sup>564</sup> Cornea, C. (2007) *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 216.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid.

example, keep their expressions blank and portray no human emotions; the members of The Family in *The Omega Man* wear mirrored sunglasses which emphasise their blank expressionless faces; and the performance of the crowds of humanity in *Soylent Green* resemble what Cornea describes as the “dehumanised and robotic underclass” of *Metropolis* (1927).<sup>567</sup> The defamiliarising effect that Cornea suggests this performance style has within science-fiction film scenarios is felt most strongly in *Planet of the Apes* in a scene between Heston/Taylor and Nova. They have been placed in separate cages and as he looks at her she attempts to mimic his smile. The way that she makes the correct facial gesture but without the ‘correct’ human emotion to accompany it, is visually evident in her blank eyes which, in turn, make the smile look false and unconvincing, effectively defamiliarising this normal human expression. The Family in *The Omega Man* are similarly portrayed as vacuous when Heston/Neville is put on trial in front of them. Despite their leader Matthias’ rabble-rousing speeches, and the fact that they are faced with an enemy who has repeatedly tried to kill them, they remain calm and unmoving. In this their performance resembles Cornea’s description of the “calmly co-ordinated and passionless behaviour” exhibited by the alien-possessed characters in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).<sup>568</sup> Their voices, when they respond to Matthias’ questions are low and monotonous and their faces convey no expression. The dialogue in *The Omega Man* explicitly states that this listlessness is the effect of their dehumanising disease.

Although Heston himself doesn’t adopt this performance style, his enactments in these films are nevertheless readable in terms of it. His displays of energy and emotion, for example, reinforce his position as truly human all the more forcefully when contrasted to the ‘others’ performance of blankness. In this way the force of Heston’s enactment of extreme emotional states verging on hysteria and madness, which were highlighted earlier in this chapter, can be seen to be generically determined. As Cornea suggests, the science-fiction film genre “has consistently questioned what stands for ‘proper’ human behaviour . . . often established in a comparison between seemingly human and non-human behaviour.”<sup>569</sup> Such ‘overplayed’ moments therefore insist on Heston’s humanity in the face of the science-fiction film’s depiction, through ‘underplaying’, of the dehumanised other. Interestingly this

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<sup>567</sup> Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema*, *ibid.*

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*



leads to a reversal of one of the hallmarks of Heston's enactments in Epic films: the restraint of powerful emotion. In the science-fiction film, which has less of a thematic focus on heroic masculinity and more on questions of human nature, this restraint in Heston's star enactments is less called upon and enactments of uncontrolled emotion become more common.

Another non-naturalistic feature of science-fiction performance style is illuminated by Vivian Sobchack's comments on dialogue in the genre. A 'liturgical' style is one of the genre-specific dialogue styles she identifies as "One ... way in which spoken dialogue in the SF film can be significantly altered so that it transcends the familiar and ordinary".<sup>570</sup> She labels this style 'liturgical' due to its "striking resemblance to verbal instances of public worship," illustrated by its use of features such as repetition, chanting and rhythmic phrasing.<sup>571</sup> The examples of this style that Sobchack identifies and discusses from the *Planet of the Apes* film series are where it is used by the Apes when reading from the 'sacred scrolls'. This style is also used in *The Omega Man*, however, when Heston/Neville is put on trial by The Family for heresy. The scene takes place in an abandoned courthouse where their leader Matthias sits raised above the other characters on the judges' bench. Heston/Neville is bound on a table below him and the rest of The Family are shown sitting in the public gallery. Matthias thus acts as both judge and preacher, which is fitting for a heresy trial, and his questions to The Family and their responses demonstrate all the features of a liturgical dialogue style that Sobchack highlighted. The specific religious form it most obviously resembles is a catechism, as The Family respond as one in solemn voices to Matthias' chanted questions:

Matthias:        Do we use the tools of the wheel as he does?

Family:         No

Matthias:       Is he of the Family?

Family:         No

Matthias:       Is he of the sacred society?

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<sup>570</sup> Sobchack, *Screening Space*, 196-7.

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

Family: No

Matthias: Then what is he?

Family: Evil

The contribution this kind of repetitious dialogue and its chanted delivery makes to the science-fiction film's atmosphere is commented on by Sobchack when she suggests that, "Its cadences and rhythms are extremely important in creating a sense of the alien," and here it particularly contributes to suggesting the non-human nature of its speakers.<sup>572</sup> Once again, this non-naturalistic dialogue style isn't used by Heston's character in any of these films, but Heston's enactment is effectively portrayed as more human through his contrastingly 'naturalistic' responses to it. This is perhaps most forcefully conveyed in the following exchange from *The Omega Man*. As Matthias continues to speak in this liturgical manner, he points at Heston/Neville and declares:

Matthias: You are discarded, you are the refuse of the past.

At this Heston/Neville turns his head towards him and snarls, "You're full of crap."

By thus continuing with the grammatical form of Matthias's phrasemaking, he effectively punctures the portentous liturgical style of Matthias' dialogue and performance, and Heston/Neville's more 'natural' use of dialogue emphasises his non-alien status. The generically driven performance style of the dehumanised characters in these films can thus be seen to affect Heston's own enactments, not through his adoption of this style but through the contrast between his naturalistic, or even overplayed, acting style and dialogue to that of the 'others' around him.

### **"You Used To Be A Nice Guy Once" - Genre Interventions in Star Themes and Structure**

Any attempt to distinguish between style and iconography on the one hand and themes and structure on the other, will fail to maintain a watertight distinction between these two aspects of film. And the features of the interaction between star and genre identified so far, whilst originating in details of the audiovisual features of the genre and star enactment, have inevitably been developed through

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<sup>572</sup> Sobchack, *Screening Space*, 197.

discussions of the thematic and structural significances of both star and genre. Nevertheless, by insisting on treating features of style and iconography as the starting point, this analysis has been able to engage in detailed discussion of their effects supported by specific examples from the films rather than prematurely framing the debate through broader generalisations, which can be the danger when discussing themes and structure alone. Certain thematic continuities within Heston's enactments have already become evident: his emergence as a natural leader, for example, is a character development that occurs in all three films as it did in his Epic enactments. The tragic death in an act of self-sacrifice for the greater good that concludes both *The Omega Man* and *Soylent Green* is also a fate familiar to the Heston hero from his Epic film enactments.<sup>573</sup> Mark Gallagher has commented on some of these continuities when he suggests that "Heston's characters advance classical and Christianity-based images of male power into future-oriented narratives".<sup>574</sup> The moral certainty that typified the Epic hero, however, can be seen to have tipped over in these films into a dangerous level of obsession and cruelty. This is explicitly highlighted in *The Omega Man* when Heston/Neville reflects ruefully on his behaviour and declares: "You used to be a nice guy once, you know that?" The level of self-doubt, even self-loathing, it reveals is such a dramatic development for the Heston hero that it warrants further investigation.

That this sense of disillusion may be a generic feature is suggested by its being a trait discernible in all Heston's roles in science-fiction films. In *Planet of the Apes* for example, Heston's character's disillusionment is explicitly referred to when he declares he joined the space mission because he believes somewhere in the universe there had to be something better than man. This disillusion is also strikingly conveyed when he mocks Landon's patriotism, laughing at him for planting a U.S. flag on the planet when they land. It is also apparent when he expresses his disgust with the sexual freedom on the earth he left behind, telling Nova bitterly that it led to "lots of love-making but no love." In *The Omega Man*, despite Neville's defence of civilisation, he can also be seen to despise the world that was destroyed by the plague. His mock negotiations with an imaginary car salesman at the start of the film, which he concludes with the words: "Thanks a lot, you cheating bastard," for example, expose his cynical attitude towards American salesmanship and his agreement with the sentiments expressed by

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<sup>573</sup> As happens most notably at the end of *Khartoum* and *El Cid*.

<sup>574</sup> Gallagher, M. (2006) *Action Figures: Men, Action Film and Contemporary Adventure Narratives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 109.

the Woodstock festival goes similarly suggests his disillusionment with the paranoid place America had become.<sup>575</sup> *Soylent Green* makes similar points but in a subtler way. Rather than having Heston's character explicitly stating this world view, it is instead inferred from his acceptance of a world in which all the faults of the present have been magnified, including the end of long-lasting loving relationships between men and women and the widening of the gap between rich and poor.

Although all three of these characters display a level of cynicism and pessimism previously unseen in Heston's enactments, this trait can nevertheless be seen as a development in his established star persona rather than an abrupt departure from it. Enactments of harshness, bitterness and even cynicism can be seen to have already been present to a certain degree in previous Heston roles. Indeed this character trait had occurred in Heston's roles frequently enough for his wife Lydia to have given these ambiguous characters of Heston's a specific title: 'hero heels'.<sup>576</sup> The oxymoronic nature of this term suggests that between the two extremes of the hero and the heel a continuum exists throughout Heston's enactments, with most of his roles occupying a point somewhere between the two, rather than existing neatly as one or other of them in a binary opposition. Even one of Heston's most outright heel-like characters, the cowboy overseer Steve Leech in *The Big Country* (William Wyler, 1958) does the right thing at the film's climax and refuses to carry out his employer's treacherous orders. Similarly, his greatest heroes display a level of determination that makes them disturbingly unsympathetic to other characters' normal emotions, being themselves impervious to normal emotions such as fear or pity. Heston's science-fiction roles, therefore, can be seen as merely occupying one end of an already existing continuum in Heston's enactments, rather than representing a new type of character.

### **An Obsolete Hero?**

Quite why all of Heston's characters in the science-fiction films display so many characteristics of the heel is worth investigating in more detail, not least to establish how far it may also be seen as a product of the films' social and historical moment of production. Reading the themes and characters of

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<sup>575</sup> Heston/Neville speaks along with this dialogue with obvious approval: "If we can't all live together and be happy, if you have to be afraid to walk out in the street, if you have to be afraid to smile at somebody, right? What kind of a way is that to go through life?"

<sup>576</sup> Of his part in *Ruby Gentry* (1952) Heston tells us, "Lydia has since observed it was the first of what she calls my 'hero heels.'" C. Heston (1995) *In the Arena: The Autobiography* (London: Harper Collins), 118.

the films of the late '60s and early '70s as reflecting contemporary political and social crises is a widespread approach.<sup>577</sup> The following comments by Xavier Mendik may be seen as representative:

In the light of Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, political and civil unrest, the construction of the Hollywood narrative altered to reveal a much more pessimistic and downbeat tone. Indeed it is noticeable that dominant cycles of the era...seem dogged by moral ambiguity.<sup>578</sup>

Such readings, however, see the specific historical context affecting all the films produced during this period, regardless of their genre or casting. But there have been more specific readings linking Heston's changing heroic persona explicitly to these historical contexts. Mark Gallagher, for example, suggests that:

The Vietnam-era films of male stars such as Steve McQueen, Charlton Heston and Lee Marvin showed the labor and rigor necessary to maintain a functional male identity in a time of social unrest. During this period, the three stars portrayed male heroes who were jaded, toughened or scarred by experiences.<sup>579</sup>

Sample goes further in linking his analysis of Heston's heroic status in *The Omega Man* to perceived changes in the power of the middle class in U.S. society. Suggesting that Matthias' description of Neville as 'obsolete':

Might just as easily apply to the middle-aged, middle class American audience that Neville, in the guise of Charlton Heston, represents. . . . When Charlton Heston, one of the greatest leading men of the fifties, tall, strapping, and intelligent, and still in his prime in 1971 is called "obsolete," it marks the end of an era.<sup>580</sup>

To what extent the Hestonian hero was in danger of becoming obsolete in the late Sixties and early Seventies is an interesting question. The fear that he may be could certainly lie behind the attempts to

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<sup>577</sup> This type of approach is also taken by Eric Greene in '*Planet of the Apes*' as *American Myth* and Ryan and Kellner in *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*.

<sup>578</sup> Mendik, X. (ed.) (2002) *Necronomicon Presents: Shocking Cinema of the Seventies* (Hereford: Noir Publishing), 11.

<sup>579</sup> Gallagher, *Action Figures*, 10.

<sup>580</sup> Sample, 'There Goes the Neighbourhood', 39.

negotiate a place for him within the changing mores of the time evident in his science-fiction film appearances. This is particularly evident in his interaction with characters who represent the 'new' young and black audiences that grew in importance at that time. As Gallagher points out, "changes in Hollywood filmmaking practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s [meant that] studios paid attention to collegiate and countercultural audiences".<sup>581</sup> Towards the end of *Planet of the Apes*, for example, a young chimp character, Lucius, is introduced whose dialogue identifies him as the character type of the rebellious teenager: he is portrayed as rightfully distrustful of adult promises and admirably rebellious against their authority, for example. Although Heston/Taylor cannot take on this teen-rebel role himself, he is clearly aligned with Lucius and his attitudes in his sympathetic attitude towards this character.

There is a similar character relationship developed in *The Omega Man* between Neville and the younger character Dutch, whose rebellious nature is signalled through his riding a motorbike and wearing a leather jacket. Dutch's initial wariness of Neville, who represents for him 'The Man' and the powers that 'scratched the world', is overcome both by Neville's medical knowledge and his messianic status as the man who could save the world. Heston/Neville is also aligned with countercultural movements through his sympathetic reaction to watching the film *Woodstock* and through his relationship with the hip, black character Lisa; as Gallagher suggests, "the introduction of a black woman as a sexual partner connotes the progressiveness of an otherwise conservative star persona".<sup>582</sup> However, the fact that Heston dies at the end of both *The Omega Man* and *Soylent Green* may suggest that the recuperation of the Hestonian hero can only go so far. Maybe, as Lisa's brother Ritchie suggests, he doesn't 'belong' in the new world of the young and the hip.

To see how far these changes in the Heston star persona are due to generic demands, and how far to the new social/historical context of the late Sixties/early Seventies, it's also useful to consider his enactments in the other genre that Heston featured in at this point in his career, the disaster movie.

### ***Earthquake and The 'End' of Charlton Heston***

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<sup>581</sup> Gallagher, *Action Figures*, 10.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid., 106.

At the end of the 1974 disaster movie *Earthquake*, Charlton Heston/Stuart Graff, after having saved a group of survivors, including the girl he loves, from a rapidly flooding storm drain, releases his safe hold to try to save his nasty wife who has just been swept away. He disappears after her to his death. Given the possible obsolescence of the Heston hero it is also tempting to read Heston's role, and particularly his death, in *Earthquake* as a meta-textual commentary on his own star persona. This is how Keane reads it, when he suggests that "it was an unexpected pleasure to see the man who parted the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) get washed down the drain along with his marriage at the end of the film."<sup>583</sup> That *Earthquake* offers itself to be read as a commentary on both Heston's star persona and the state of Hollywood at the time is evident in Pauline Kael's reaction to the film on its release:

What we really know when we watch this movie is that the destruction orgy on the screen is only a jokey form of the destruction orgy behind the screen, and we begin to take a campy pleasure in seeing the big name actors – and the movie-picture capital itself – totaled.<sup>584</sup>

Both these comments suggest that Heston's star persona had been eroded to such an extent by the mid-seventies that audiences may have enjoyed witnessing his destruction. Just as Kael reads the end of the traditional Hollywood film industry into the destruction of Los Angeles depicted in the film, Heston's role as a former football star turned engineer can be seen to contextualise the fading splendour of his physical appearance, which is displayed in the opening sequence when we see him remove his tracksuit jacket to take a shower after training.

Both these possible readings of the destruction in *Earthquake* are suggested by Heston/Stuart's first appearance in the film. The equilibrium of the pre-disaster world is established as we see him jogging in a long shot with the Hollywood sign visible on the hills behind him: both Heston and Hollywood are thus set up for destruction. That Heston/Stuart's faded beauty of a wife is played by Ava Gardner, his former love interest from *55 Days at Peking*, only makes such readings harder to resist. It seems a cruel irony then that when the pretty young girl Rosa Amici (Victoria Principal) decides to go to the movies, she chooses to watch the Clint Eastwood film *High Plains Drifter* (1973). This choice of film

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<sup>583</sup> Keane, S. (2002) 'The Stars Don't Always Survive: Disaster Movies as Shocking Cinema' in Mendik, X. (ed.) *Necronomicon Presents: Shocking Cinema of the Seventies* (Hereford: Noir Publishing), 46.

<sup>584</sup> Kael, P. (1976) *Reeling* (Boston: Little Brown and Company), 387.

underlines both the replacement of Heston with younger, hipper leading men, and also the replacement of the kind of studio-led film production *Earthquake* itself represents by star-originated co-productions of which *High Plains Drifter* was a successful example.<sup>585</sup> Such a meta-textual reading is not the most common way to approach disaster movies, however. The kind of analysis disaster movies seem to have attracted is more semantic than syntactic. There are numerous accounts of its narrative structures and character types, as well as ideological readings of its possible meanings.<sup>586</sup> The two syntactic elements that are regularly highlighted, however, are its use of spectacular action and its deployment of stars; as Keane puts it, the films relied on “the combined draw of spectacle and stars”.<sup>587</sup> This double appeal is evident from the poster design shared by many of the biggest disaster movies of the seventies. These posters combine a dramatic image of the film’s central disaster with a superimposed gallery of photographs of the main actors designed to emphasise the size of the ‘all-star’ cast.<sup>588</sup>

The different status of the ‘stars’ making up these ‘all-star’ casts are worth investigating in more detail, however, for as David A. Cook has pointed out, “the practice was usually to mix one or two current stars with myriad performers who no longer held that status,” and some, it should be added, who had *never* held that status.<sup>589</sup> Below the top-billed stars on the poster for *Earthquake*, for example, there are the names and faces of performers better described as character actors and those of new would-be stars who never subsequently achieved that status.<sup>590</sup> Although the logic of casting stars might seem self-evident, different reasons have been suggested to explain the centrality of star casting to this genre. From an institutional point of view stars guaranteed worldwide box-office returns which were vital for a genre that demanded such a big budget: “major stars were especially important in securing

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<sup>585</sup> *High Plains Drifter* was co-produced by Universal and Eastwood’s own company, Malpaso.

<sup>586</sup> See for example: Roddick, ‘Only the Stars Survive: Disaster Movies in the Seventies’; Ryan and Kellner, ‘Crisis Films’ in *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Films*; and M. Yacowar ‘The Bug in the Rug: Notes on the Disaster Movie’.

<sup>587</sup> Keane, *Disaster Movies*, 42.

<sup>588</sup> The poster for *Airport* (1970) for example has twelve individual images of the cast, *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) has 11 and *Earthquake* (1974) has 10.

<sup>589</sup> Cook, D. A. (2000) *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 251.

<sup>590</sup> A good example of the former is Barry Sullivan who plays a seismologist in *Earthquake* and has eighth position on the poster and attendant photo display.



foreign markets, which in the 1970s accounted for roughly half of a studio film's grosses".<sup>591</sup> The multi-strand narratives that characterised this genre also led to the tendency to cast a number of recognisable stars as the main characters in order to enable the audience to follow each strand of the narrative more coherently. One of the biggest changes for the Heston star enactment, therefore, is that despite his receiving top billing in all the disaster movies he appeared in, both his centrality to the plot's narrative and his screen time are much reduced compared to his previous starring roles, and it will be interesting to see how far this impacts on the specificity of Heston's enactments within this genre.

### ***Substantial and Reassuring: Stars as Archetypes***

There is another reason for the casting of stars of all types in disaster movies, which is linked to the characterisation typical of this genre. Roddick suggests that character psychology in this genre is reduced to such an elementary level that the films have to be peopled with archetypes that will react in predictable ways to their situation based on their class, gender, and age.<sup>592</sup> The casting of stars, he suggests, can therefore fill the void left by such limited characterisation as "the archetypes are extended by the known personality of the star playing the part".<sup>593</sup> This is similar to Maurice Yacowar's comment that in disaster movies "the stars depend upon their familiarity from previous films, rather than developing a new characterization".<sup>594</sup> This reliance on a major star's existing persona to fill in the gaps in their characterisation, however, can sometimes create more complex extra-textual significances than the film can bear, as has already been noted in the opening comments on Heston's role as Stuart Graff in *Earthquake*.

To consider how far Heston's star enactments can be seen to 'extend' the archetypes they are cast in, it is worth considering both the archetypes that Heston is provided with by the scripts, and the ways in which his star persona may extend them. Roddick himself suggests that "what we respond to on the screen is not someone called Stuart Graff (*Earthquake*) or Alan Murdock (*Airport 1975*), but someone

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<sup>591</sup> Cook, *Lost Illusions*, 346.

<sup>592</sup> Roddick, 'Only the Stars Survive', 252.

<sup>593</sup> Ibid.

<sup>594</sup> Yacowar, 'The Bug in the Rug', 269.

far more substantial called Charlton Heston".<sup>595</sup> Although it may be tempting to read the term 'substantial' as making a specific comment on Heston's star persona, it is clear that Roddick is only using it here in contrast to the 'insubstantial' nature of the plot's characterisation. Roddick is a little more specific later, however, when he suggests that the heroes of the disaster movie share many attributes with the heroes of the Western:

The new hero has all the attributes of the old – muscles, good looks, sexual aggressiveness – but is a hero for the technological age: Charlton Heston with a degree in electrical engineering.<sup>596</sup>

This is not really the place to dispute how far those characteristics can be said to apply to the Western hero, but it is fair to point out that the specific features Roddick lists do not seem to fit Heston's enactments in the disaster movies either. Heston's muscles, for example, are not much in evidence in the disaster movies. Except for the one instance in *Earthquake*, which has already been discussed, there is no display of his naked body at all. His good looks may be said to be implicitly suggested in the majority of these films in which he has attracted young and pretty girlfriends but in *Two Minute Warning* his police commander character has no love interest at all. As for 'sexual aggressiveness', this can hardly be accepted as an accurate description of the 'old' Heston hero for, as has previously been discussed, a level of sexual reticence rather than aggressiveness is the hallmark of the majority of Heston's star enactments.

Heston's disaster-movie roles do in fact develop further the changes in his relationship to sexuality and desire that were noted in the science-fiction movies. In those films, although still not drawn as the instigator of his sexual relationships, he nevertheless found himself with a sexually willing partner without the ties of monogamy and romance that were the prerequisites for such relationships in his earlier Epic film appearances. This change is continued in the relationships in which Heston's disaster-movie characters are involved. In *Skyjacked* for instance Heston's pilot character has had an extra-marital affair with his senior air stewardess; in *Airport 1975* he is also a pilot in a relationship with a chief stewardess, one which he is unwilling to put onto a more formal footing; and in *Earthquake* he

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<sup>595</sup> Roddick, 'Only the Stars Survive', 252.

<sup>596</sup> Roddick, *ibid.*, 257.

embarks on an extra-marital affair with the widow of a colleague: whether any of these affairs can be classified as representing 'sexual aggressiveness' is doubtful however. Heston/Murdock may be depicted as acting insensitively towards Black/Nancy when they meet at the beginning of *Airport 1975*, by dismissing her desire for more commitment, but the fact that she then refuses to spend time with him undermines any suggestion of sexual aggressiveness on his part. The flashbacks to his adulterous affair with Yvette Mimieux in *Skyjacked* depict him pushing her on a swing which, whilst being clichéd, is coded as 'romantic' rather than aggressive behaviour.

*Earthquake* can be seen to go to the greatest lengths to absolve Heston's character of any hints of sexual aggressiveness, as the young widow character is drawn quite explicitly as the instigator of their adulterous liaison. After they have slept together for the first, and only, time she even says to him, "You didn't seduce me, I seduced you." Far from displaying the sexual aggressiveness of Heston's persona then, the presentation of these relationships is much more effectively read as fitting the generic demands of disaster-movie narratives which "often develop . . . romantic subplots" according to Steven Keane.<sup>597</sup> He further points out how love affairs (extra-marital or otherwise), and the questions of commitment they raise, allow for the development of conflicts between professional duty and personal commitments within the films' plots, and for this reason they are a recurrent feature of the narrative of the disaster-movie genre. In the original *Airport* (1970), for example, the two leading characters are both involved in relationship subplots developed around their extra-marital affairs.

These generically motivated aspects of the romantic subplots in the disaster movie, and the fact that Roddick's other characterisations of the Heston persona, such as muscles and sexual attractiveness, are not explicitly called upon in his appearances, suggests that the 'known personality' of the star may not be as straightforwardly 'known' as Roddick claims. This is further demonstrated when one considers what other writers have suggested Charlton Heston's presence can be seen to bring to his disaster movie roles. Keane, for example, suggests that audiences would have found his presence 'reassuring' due to his previous film roles:

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<sup>597</sup> Keane, *Disaster Movies*, 17.

Charlton Heston plays Charlton Heston and the implications are that we can expect him to rescue the plummeting airplane in *Airport 1975* as confidently as he rode his crippled chariot in *Ben Hur* . . . in this case he does and that is extremely reassuring.<sup>598</sup>

Pauline Kael, however, finds Heston's existing persona fails to expand these disaster movie characters in the way Roddick suggests he should, arguing that "the repressed acting, granitic physique, and godlike-insurance-salesman manner that made him so inhumanly perfect for fifties spectacles have also destroyed his credibility".<sup>599</sup> She suggests that Heston's known personality, as the perfect hero, undermines any attempt in these films to characterise him as a normal and fallible human being.

### **Uniformed Heroes and Professional Men**

The disaster movie does not just rely on the star's existing persona for its characterisations, however; they can also be seen to regularly deploy two social types in their leading roles which could also be seen to expand the archetypes in some way, particularly through their suggestion of class characteristics. As Keane suggests "the typical disaster movie's characters are distinguished by their jobs, status or standing in society".<sup>600</sup> The two types of hero identified by Roddick as recurring in this genre are what he calls 'uniformed heroes' and 'professional men'. The role of the uniformed hero he describes thus: "A natural 'leader' emerges . . . and, most significantly of all, wears a uniform of some kind to denote his function" and he further points out how sometimes the movies "back up their uniformed heroes with a hero from the professional world".<sup>601</sup> Ryan and Kellner also noted this typical pairing of heroes and described it in class terms as an alliance between a lower middle-class hero and a member of the professional managerial class.<sup>602</sup> Although this pairing may not be present in every disaster movie it can be discerned in all those in which Heston appeared, and it is interesting to consider which of these roles he is assigned and why, especially as this pairing of heroes can be seen

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<sup>598</sup> Keane (2002) 'The Stars Don't Always Survive: Disaster Movies as Shocking Cinema' in *Shocking Cinema of the Seventies*, 45.

<sup>599</sup> Kael, P. (1976) *Reeling* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company), 386.

<sup>600</sup> Keane, *Disaster Movies*, 18.

<sup>601</sup> Roddick, 'Only the Stars Survive', 151.

<sup>602</sup> Ryan and Kellner, 'Crisis Films', 55.

to lead to the dilution of the power and presence of the Heston hero in three of his disaster-movie appearances.

This dilution of power is not just due to the presence of a co-star, although it cannot be denied that this alone diminishes Heston's role in the unfolding narrative. This may seem rather less evident in *Airport 1975* due to the casting of a female co-star whose display of fear and panic throughout the film undermines any heroic status she may assume. Nevertheless, it is the chief air stewardess Nancy Pryor (Karen Black) who takes the part of the lower middle-class uniformed hero and Heston/Murdock who is assigned the professional back-up role. Although he is a pilot we never see him in uniform in the film, which seems to support Roddick's comments on the significance uniform plays in establishing roles in these films. Heston/Murdock may have a high level of specialist knowledge but Nancy/Black displays the most bravery and leadership, at least until Heston/Murdock is winched into the plane to save the day and land it safely. In *Earthquake* the casting of George Kennedy as the uniformed hero can be seen as a more serious challenge to Heston's heroic status. This is partly due to Kennedy's better credentials as a disaster-movie hero, established through his key role in the original *Airport*, but it is also an effect of their respective roles in the narrative. There is one scene in particular, which occurs after the initial earthquake, in which this challenge is demonstrated. Heston/Stuart is driving through the devastated city trying to find his lover. The police officer Lou/Kennedy, by contrast, is trying to organise help and relief for the wounded. He forces Heston/Stuart to help him to take the wounded to hospital by threatening him with his gun. For the Heston hero to be acting as the more selfish character is surprising and for him to be made to do the right thing by force is particularly unusual. In both these films Heston is not cast as the 'natural leader' but instead as the more tainted 'specialist'; his knowledge and skill are nevertheless vital at the end of both *Earthquake* and *Airport 1975*.<sup>603</sup> Both films end with Heston taking control of a highly dangerous situation from the uniformed hero and saving a large number of otherwise doomed people through a mixture of specialist knowledge and personal qualities of bravery and determination.

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<sup>603</sup> Roddick points out how the civilian hero is somehow tainted.

## Only Charlton Heston Doesn't Survive

The narrative of *Earthquake* ends very differently to that of Heston's other disaster films in which his character survives. Why Charlton Heston/Stuart Graff dies at the end of *Earthquake* is a question that goes right to the heart of the debate about how stars can be seen to intervene in genres, as the reasons for a star's survival, or otherwise, has also formed a central debate in writing on this genre. Roddick found the title for his essay on the disaster genre 'Only the Stars Survive' in a description of the scenario for *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) by its producer Irwin Allen, "In the first six minutes 1,400 people are killed and only the stars survive".<sup>604</sup> Although Allen was talking about the stars surviving the initial disaster and not necessarily the entire film, it is certainly true that the major stars, whose names appear first in the cast list, very rarely perish in disaster movies. Gene Hackman is the only example of a top-billed star who dies in a disaster movie, apart from Heston in *Earthquake*, and it is fair to say that in 1974 Hackman was not yet a major star. Various reasons have been suggested to account for the seemingly anomalous fate of Heston/Stuart, therefore, by writers on this genre. Roddick suggests Heston's character died because he deserved to, arguing that "disasters are a highly moral affair, and though the wicked are not the only ones to perish, they rarely survive"; he suggests that "the bitch (Ava Gardner) and her adulterous husband (Charlton Heston) also perish" for this reason.<sup>605</sup> He is supported in this reading by Yacowar, who argues that "Heston must die for his infidelity – and as a reward for his courage and final faithfulness, his death saves him from the long pain of a loveless marriage."<sup>606</sup>

Although these readings may appear plausible, they do not tally with the generic convention we have already identified within the disaster movie narrative in which adulterous liaisons are a common plot complication for one, or both, of the leading men. Far from being punished for such behaviour, these affairs are usually portrayed non-judgementally as part of the characters' process of learning from disaster what really matters. Thus the happy outcome of the narrative in *Airport* is that Dean Martin's adulterous pilot commits to his pregnant girlfriend. Divorce is not viewed as a disgrace or a punishment in these films either, so to suggest, as Yacowar does, that Heston/Stuart faced a loveless marriage if

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<sup>604</sup> Roddick, 'Only the Stars Survive', 243.

<sup>605</sup> Roddick, *ibid.*

<sup>606</sup> Yacowar, 'The Bug in the Rug', 274.

he had survived, is equally mistaken. On the contrary, he could look forward to a happy new family with a pretty younger wife and a child which his present wife had failed to provide. Steven Keane also disputes Roddick and Yacowar's "basic, conservative reading of disaster movies" by pointing out inconsistencies in the supposed moral judgements in the narrative over who dies and who lives.<sup>607</sup> In *The Towering Inferno*, for example, he asks, "Why should the innocent Jennifer Jones die and the man who is at least partly responsible for her death live?"<sup>608</sup>

The typical narrative structures of this genre, far from motivating Heston/Stuart's death, also suggest he should survive. His role of the professional hero suggests he should survive to rebuild the world after having learnt his lesson from the disaster, which is what this character type usually does according to Roddick: "the end of a disaster movie posits, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, a new world whose inhabitants have learned from the mistakes of the past and from their experience of the disaster".<sup>609</sup> That Heston/Stuart has learnt lessons is made explicit through dialogue near the end of the film when he expresses shame with his profession and says they "never should have put up those forty-storey monstrosities." He also displays all the characteristics that Roddick suggests the survivors in the new world share: bravery, moral fibre and technological brilliance.<sup>610</sup> Not only does Heston/Stuart not deserve to die but, according to the genre's own conventions, he is actually positioned as the type of character who should survive. That survival on these terms and for these reasons was indeed the intended fate of his character is revealed in Heston's autobiography: according to Heston, in the early drafts of the script, "they wanted him to live, get the girl and rebuild the city."<sup>611</sup>

If Heston/Stuart's death at the end of *Earthquake* is not generically motivated, how else might it be accounted for? Heston claims that it was his idea that his character should die attempting to save his wife, and he gives two reasons for suggesting this. The first is that he had "considerable experience in dying usefully for the cameras," which suggests that he was aware that such a narrative outcome fitted

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<sup>607</sup> Keane, *Disaster Movies*, 41.

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>609</sup> Roddick, 'Only the Stars Survive', 258-9.

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>611</sup> Heston, C. (1996) *In the Arena: The Biography* (London: Harper Collins), 471.

his star persona and played to his strengths as a star.<sup>612</sup> The second was his belief that the proposed ending was too predictable: "let's surprise them for a change. Let him die trying to help someone . . . especially his bitchy wife".<sup>613</sup> Although Heston's autobiography is not a verifiably objective source, the fact that it reflects what has already been concluded about the generic formula of the disaster movie lends these comments a certain credibility. It is notable then that Heston records asserting his power of script approval forcefully on this film to insist on an ending for his character that he preferred, even going so far as refusing to shoot scenes which may have left the way open for his character to survive. When the director was setting up scenes that could leave the way open for George Kennedy's policeman to die instead of Stuart Graff, Heston says he made his position clear to him: "I have script approval, I don't have final cut. . . . What I will not shoot I promise you, is a scene where I survive. That's not the script I approved."<sup>614</sup>

Whatever Heston's motivation for this decision, it works to reassert his Epic star persona in a genre that had to some extent undermined his usual heroic status. This is one example where the star can be seen to intervene in the genre both actually and symbolically. Finally then, it would appear that Stuart Graff dies because he is also Charlton Heston. This is an intervention based on Heston's star persona of nobility and chastity, in which the choice of duty over personal happiness is a genuine dilemma and can be seen to have disrupted the usual workings of the genre in which the right professional choice tends also to be the right personal one. Maybe Stuart Graff's infidelity loomed so large for Roddick and Yacowar because he was embodied by Charlton Heston, to whom different and possibly higher moral standards apply.

This detailed comparison of the star in and across a range of genres has thus allowed for a systematic isolation of those features of the star enactment that can be confidently ascribed to the presence of the star, such as his classical body and his defence of civilisation. It has also allowed for an acknowledgement of how those significances can be shifted and reformulated by the demands of genre, such as when Heston finds himself playing a more weak and fallible hero. It also allows for an

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<sup>612</sup> Ibid.

<sup>613</sup> Ibid., 472.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid.



acknowledgement of the changes within the star enactment due to the passing of time, for, as we have seen, Heston's body in 1974 did not convey the same significance as his body in 1956.

## Conclusions/Ramifications      A Large Part of Our Fascination with the Cinema

*Film theory fulfills its mission not when transcendental logic or external systems step in to make sense of the flux of film life, but when the encounters we have with films and ideas urge us to adjust ourselves so that we can fully hear them [and] truly understand what they might have to say. - Dudley Andrew<sup>615</sup>*

The kind of approach that has been adopted in this thesis is not one that is designed to come to overarching conclusions about the star's permanent meaning(s), but rather to be alert to the shifting significances that a star's enactments can convey, not only across films but also within them. This is not a weakness as far as its aims are concerned, but it does mean it is more difficult to develop the kinds of confident and 'grand' conclusions that are drawn at the end of traditional star study. This is why I am more interested now in considering the ramifications of the insights that this investigation has revealed into Charlton Heston specifically and star study generally. This investigation has attempted at all points to try to work with the aesthetics of Heston's star enactments in order to truly understand what they might have to say, and the approaches and methods that have been adopted were chosen on the basis that they should be able to help with this aim.

The methodological decision to reject approaches based on transcendental logic or external systems was partly driven by necessity because, as has been suggested, such approaches have failed to account for all the features of the star phenomenon, especially those aspects of beauty and pleasure that this investigation wanted to focus on. But they were also rejected in the positive belief that the aesthetic and phenomenological approaches adopted in their stead were more relevant and useful in film studies, due to their primary focus on the detail of film rather than external theoretical systems. Another reason for rejecting previous approaches was the sense of their having reached a level of academic exhaustion in which their methods had either become repetitive and their conclusions

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<sup>615</sup> Andrew, D. (1984) *Concepts in Film Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), ix.

unoriginal, or their focus had broadened so far in the search of new subjects as to have abandoned the film star altogether. Christine Geraghty's argument that the star-as-celebrity can and should be differentiated from the star-as-performer suggests that for star study to continue to develop constructively within film studies it needs to focus much more on the latter category and leave the former to cultural studies.

In attempting to recentre the star in star studies in this way this investigation has also rejected those approaches that aim to discuss the star's contribution to a film's significance solely through an understanding of acting and performance. Their rejection of the cinematic features of the star's enactment means that whilst features of the star's acting/performance are put at the centre of these investigations, this is at the cost of rejecting their filmic specificities and even their status as a star. Although the star needs to be put at the centre of star studies, the film equally needs to be put at the centre of that study. It was to ensure this dual focus that this thesis adopted the designation of the star enactment which is designed to fulfil the failed promise of star study by allowing one to "address the organisation of the industry, the properties of individual texts, and the experiences of the audience and to relate all three within a small and coherent focus".<sup>616</sup>

Within the star enactment it is not only possible, but vital to address the issue of performance, for, as this investigation has revealed, previous negative evaluations of Charlton Heston's skills and abilities as an actor in film studies have failed to allow for the different styles of performance demanded by the kinds of genres he appeared in. The careful delineation of both Epic and science-fiction performance styles in this thesis has shown how Heston's performances have been both appropriate for these genres and, at times, moving and resonant. This careful awareness of performance styles has also shown that the negative assessment of Heston's performance style in much academic writing is due to prejudices about culturally preferred modes and methods of performance. The mode of acting in realist drama is thus given the highest status as it is a style that demands both subtle characterisation and the invisibility of the star performer. Similarly, 'method' acting is seen as the most artistically valued style of acting and film performers who use it are treated with a great deal more seriousness and respect than stars like Charlton Heston. The aim of positing Charlton Heston as a worthy object of study is now possible, therefore, as this thesis' methods have allowed his performances to be analysed in a way

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<sup>616</sup> McDonald, P., *Ibid.*, 80.

that is alert to their strengths and pleasures rather than describing them in terms of lack and failure. Other misconceptions about Heston's image and persona have been easier to dispute. It is now possible to see that ideas of him as representing certain identities such as masculinity and whiteness are both oversimplified and based on misreadings, or no readings at all, of his film appearances. In a similar way his alleged representation of conservative values has been undermined by both the more subtle readings produced by the methods applied in this investigation, and by a consideration of a wider range of his film appearances than are normally referred to.

The other reasons for Heston's neglect have been thoroughly engaged with in earlier chapters, but if this thesis could set an example for further study it would hopefully be to return attention in star studies to major Hollywood film stars who have still not been investigated in the depth that their box-office and cultural status would seem to demand. During my own investigation, for example, I have been able to touch on the figure of Kirk Douglas, but both he and Burt Lancaster strike me as equally important stars from the same period as Heston who haven't received a reasonable level of academic attention relative to their significance. Whilst not every significant star can be thoroughly investigated, it seems reasonable to argue for some more academically objective criteria to be developed and applied in the field, when work is being published on film stars that contains studies of obscure stars, minor celebrities and character actors.

In order to posit the star as a site of meaning production this thesis has selected and adopted analytical methods capable of describing and isolating the significances and effects of the star enactment. One of the key methods that has been developed is the analytical framework that is systematically applied throughout the thesis to film sequences. The application of this framework allows for the production of significance and effect in the star enactment to be more carefully pinpointed and acknowledged in the analysis, whether it be through a gesture, an effect of lighting or interaction with a prop. The next key methodological development that this thesis offers to star study is the new and more precise method of commutation testing. As this test is based on detailed similarities of genre, scene type, star and historical context it allows for the significances and effects that have been ascribed to the star aesthetic to be more objectively tested through commutation. By commuting Charlton Heston and Kirk Douglas in this way it has been possible to suggest which features of Heston's enactment may be due to generic interventions and which can be ascribed more confidently

to his star intervention. The final methodological innovation that this thesis' aims demanded was the adoption of an ekphrastic style of writing. This more rhetorically engaged style is capable of rendering the audiovisual and somatic features of the star enactment into writing in a way that makes it possible to both acknowledge the experience of film as an artistic medium and share its emotional and bodily effects. These methods may not seem highly innovative and indeed they have all already been applied in star studies, but the demands of middle-level research are not to suggest new theories capable of explaining everything about film. This thesis has been driven rather by an attempt to account for features of the star enactment that star study was not capable of accounting for, and to give weight and consideration to an unjustly neglected film star. This thesis does contribute to developing the field of star study, nevertheless, for all these methods, either singly or together, are capable of being applied constructively to other stars from throughout cinema.

## Appendix I - Star Enactment Analytical Framework

### 1.1 Key Elements

Main Feature	Body	Face		Movement		Voice
Sub-feature		Appearance	Expression/movements	Gesture	Action	
Descriptive detail	Appearance of Skin	Make-up	Eyes	Hands	Whole body movements Speed and Style	Volume
	Build	Hair	Eyebrows	Arms		Pitch
	Height	Eyes	Mouth	Head		Timbre
	Position	Position to camera	Throat			Accent
	Stance	Tilt				Breath
	Costume					

### 1.2 Contributory Elements

Main Feature	Framing	Camera Use	Cinematography	Props/figure position	Editing
Descriptive detail	Central/left/right	Shot size	Film stock	Relation to other actors	POV structures
	Foreground/Background	Movement	Colour	Interaction with props	Objective shots
	Relationship to mise-en-scène	Angle	Lighting		Subjective shots
	Screen ratio				Shot/reverse shot structures

### 1.3 Extra-filmic Elements

Main Feature	Narrative Role	Genre role	Existing Star Image	Performance Style and mode	Production Context	Reception Context
Examples	Hero Villain Love interest Support Cameo	Detective Police chief Knight Scientist	Promotion Publicity Criticism	Method Theatrical Technique Comedy Action	Studio system Package Deal Star-initiated package Script approval	Box Office Fan responses

## **Appendix II – Star Biography Sheets**



## BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLTON HESTON

Since winning the Academy Award this year for his superb portrayal of "BEN-HUR", Charlton Heston has been biding his time until the right story with the right role came along. During the past year, every major studio and independent producer has offered him their most important properties as a possible starring vehicle to follow "BEN-HUR".

None of them, Heston felt, was sufficiently interesting to interrupt his much deserved vacation.

Then, one day in July, Samuel Bronston and director Anthony Mann submitted the screen-play for their forthcoming production of "EL CID", the life story of Spain's legendary hero of the 11th Century who drove the invading African Moors out of Spain and united the entire country under a Christian king. Heston read the exciting story of El Cid's many conquests in battle and in love, and happily agreed to play the role.

"An actor is lucky if, once in a decade, he can find a role that makes a lasting impression on motion picture audiences". Heston recently told a Hollywood interviewer. "BEN-HUR" was such a role. And the character of El Cid has the same stature. In addition to being a great warrior and leader of men, he was also a man of pervading faith and humility. He earned the respect and affection of Christian and Moor alike because he was honest and courageous in his actions on their behalf. In their gratitude, they named him "El Cid" meaning "The Lord".

Charlton Heston has been singularly unique in his choice of roles. In less than ten years, he has been starred in three of the most ambitious motion picture productions ever undertaken by Hollywood. "The Greatest Show on Earth", "The Ten Commandments" and the fabulously successful, "Ben Hur".

Heston was born on October 4th in Evanston, Illinois, where his father, Chester Heston, was a mill operator (Charlton was his mother's maiden name). He attended grade school in Evanston and traveled to Trier High School in the neighboring suburb of Winnetka because it offered an outstanding dramatic course. Upon graduation, he enrolled in Northwestern University, where he majored in speech while appearing in practically every play produced by the college dramatic club. While still in college, he began his professional career by acting on a number of daytime radio shows in Chicago.

In 1944, Heston enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and spent the next three years as a radio operator on a B-29 stationed in the Aleutians. Just prior to entering the service, he married his college sweetheart, actress Lydia Clarke.

After his discharge, Heston and his wife went to Asheville, North Carolina, as co-directors and performers in the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Theater, later known as the Asheville Community Theater. The young couple appeared there in such plays as "The State of the Union", "The Glass Menagerie" and "Kiss and Tell".

In 1948, Heston joined Katherine Cornell's production and "Anthony and Cleopatra", performing several different roles during the play's successful Broadway run. During this period, he also played leading roles in a number of plays produced on "Studio One" and other outstanding dramatic television programs.

He appeared too, in the Broadway productions of "The Leaf and the Bough" and opposite Martha Scott in "Design for a Stained Glass Window". He also found time in 1948 to appear for 13 weeks at the Mt. Greta, Pa Summer Theater, with his wife appearing opposite him in several plays.

Heston made his film debut as Mark Anthony in David Bradley's 16 mm. film version of "Julius Caesar". His work in this attracted the interest of Hollywood and Heston was called to the Coast to appear in a leading role in "Dark City". He later was signed by Cecil B. DeMille for the leading role in "The Greatest Show on Earth", the film that brought Heston to prominence. He has since starred in 17 top-budget films the most recent of which, other than "BEN-HUR", were "The Buccaneer" and "The Wreck of the Mary Deare".

A congenial but serious man, Heston, his wife and their son Fraser have been enjoying the magnificent new home he recently built in Southern California. Tennis and horseback riding are his favourite sports for keeping in trim. An avid reader of both novels and biographies, Heston also prefers symphonic music. An expert artist, he usually amused everyone on the sets of his films with his free hand sketches.

While in Spain to portray the title role of "El Cid", Heston will have an opportunity to relive one of the most colorful eras in the history of Spain. To be filmed by director Anthony Mann principally in the actual locales of the triumphs of Spain's great Christian hero, "El Cid" will give motion picture audiences their first look at the beautiful castles, cathedrals and works of art of 11th Century Spain which are still beautifully preserved at Burgos, Avila, Oviedo, Valencia and other true life backgrounds of the history.

**METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER BIOGRAPHIES**

**KIRK DOUGLAS**

The career of Kirk Douglas is an outstanding example of the fulfillment of the great American dream -- 20th Century style.

He was born in Amsterdam, New York, December 9. His Russian-born parents went to this hub of America's great carpet and rug industry seeking liberty. For this privilege, they were willing to live and work in the most abject poverty.

The only boy among six sisters, Kirk received none of the coddling and spoiling that usually goes with being little brother to lots of girls. A constant shortage of money plus a minimum of food forced him to begin earning money during his early school days.

He rose at five a.m. seven days a week to meet the train from New York, pick up and deliver the city newspapers. After a full day in school, he rushed to meet the late afternoon train and deliver the evening papers, returning home, if he was lucky, by 7.30 at night.

While at Wilbur Lynch High School in Amsterdam, Kirk found a sympathetic and understanding friend in an English teacher named Louise Livingstone. It was she who introduced him to the world of drama.

Before long Kirk was hailed by his teachers and the entire student body as Lynch's best actor. He led assemblies, won oratorical contests, recited poetry, staged plays and did his share on the debating team.

During the year following his graduation from high school Kirk worked in an Amsterdam department store. He later took his small savings and hitch-hiked to St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York.

In addition to a part-time job as waiter and his schedule of classes, Douglas found time for sports, becoming the college's leading wrestler. For three years he was the undefeated inter-collegiate wrestling champion.

Participating in university dramatics brought him the realization that acting would become his career.

After his senior year at St. Lawrence, Kirk journeyed to New York City to seek a scholarship at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. A special scholarship was created for him following a single reading for the head of the Academy.

Far from home, living in a tiny room in the Settlement House in Greenwich Village, Kirk found the days lean, hungry and lonely. A part-time job at Schrafft's Restaurant provided the actor with his only income during his two years at the Academy. It also indirectly affected his entire career. For it was there that he met Lauren Bacall, who years later interested Hollywood in Kirk Douglas.

After small roles on Broadway in "Spring Again" and "Three Sisters," Kirk attended the Midshipmen School at Notre Dame, graduating as an ensign. He served with the anti-submarine patrol in the Atlantic and Pacific waters as communications officer.

Soon after his discharge Douglas returned to Broadway to replace Richard Widmark in "Kiss and Tell." At the same time, he launched himself as a radio actor, with leads in scores of daytime serials and an occasional appearance on "We, the People." Important roles in "Alice in Arms" and "Trio" followed.

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Douglas' big Broadway chance came in "The Wind is Ninety." By this time Lauren Bacall was Hollywood's latest screen sensation, but she hadn't forgotten Kirk. She convinced Hal Wallis that Douglas was a great screen bet. But he turned down Wallis' offer of a screen test. He wanted to continue on the stage.

A few months later, when no Broadway jobs were forthcoming, Douglas walked into Wallis' New York offices to ask if the offer was still open.

Results came quickly. In "The Strange Love of Martha Ivers," Douglas was instantly hailed by press and public. After six films in quick succession, he was catapulted to stardom in Stanley Kramer's "Champion."

Following recent roles in "Detective Story" and "The Big Sky," Douglas came to M-G-M for the first time to star with Lana Turner in THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL, an exciting story of Hollywood.

In addition to acting, Kirk Douglas has become an independent producer. His company, "Bryna Productions," named in honour of his mother, has a releasing agreement with M-G-M.

#### STATISTICS IN BRIEF

Born Kirk Douglas, Amsterdam, New York, December 9, of Russian-born parents. Weight: 12st. 7lbs. Hair: Blond. Eyes: Green. Educated: Public school, Amsterdam; St. Lawrence University, Canton, N.Y. Married: Diana Dill, November 2, 1943. Two children: Michael, born September 25, 1944; Joel, born January 23, 1947. Divorced, February 8, 1950. Married Anne Buydens, May 29, 1954. Son, Peter, born November, 1955.

Stage experience: "Spring Again", "Three Sisters", "Kiss and Tell", "Alice in Arms", "Trio", "The Wind is Ninety".

#### PICTURES

"The Strange Love of Martha Ivers," "Out of the Past," "I Walk Alone," "Mourning Becomes Electra," "The Walls of Jericho," "My Dear Secretary," "A Letter to Three Wives," "Champion," "Young Man of Music," "The Glass Menagerie," "Along the Great Divide," "The Big Carnival," "Detective Story," "The Big Trees," "The Big Sky"; THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL, 1952; THE STORY OF THREE LOVES, 1955; "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea," 1954; "The Indian Fighter," LUST FOR LIFE, 1955. Coming: KING KELLY (M-G-M release).

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